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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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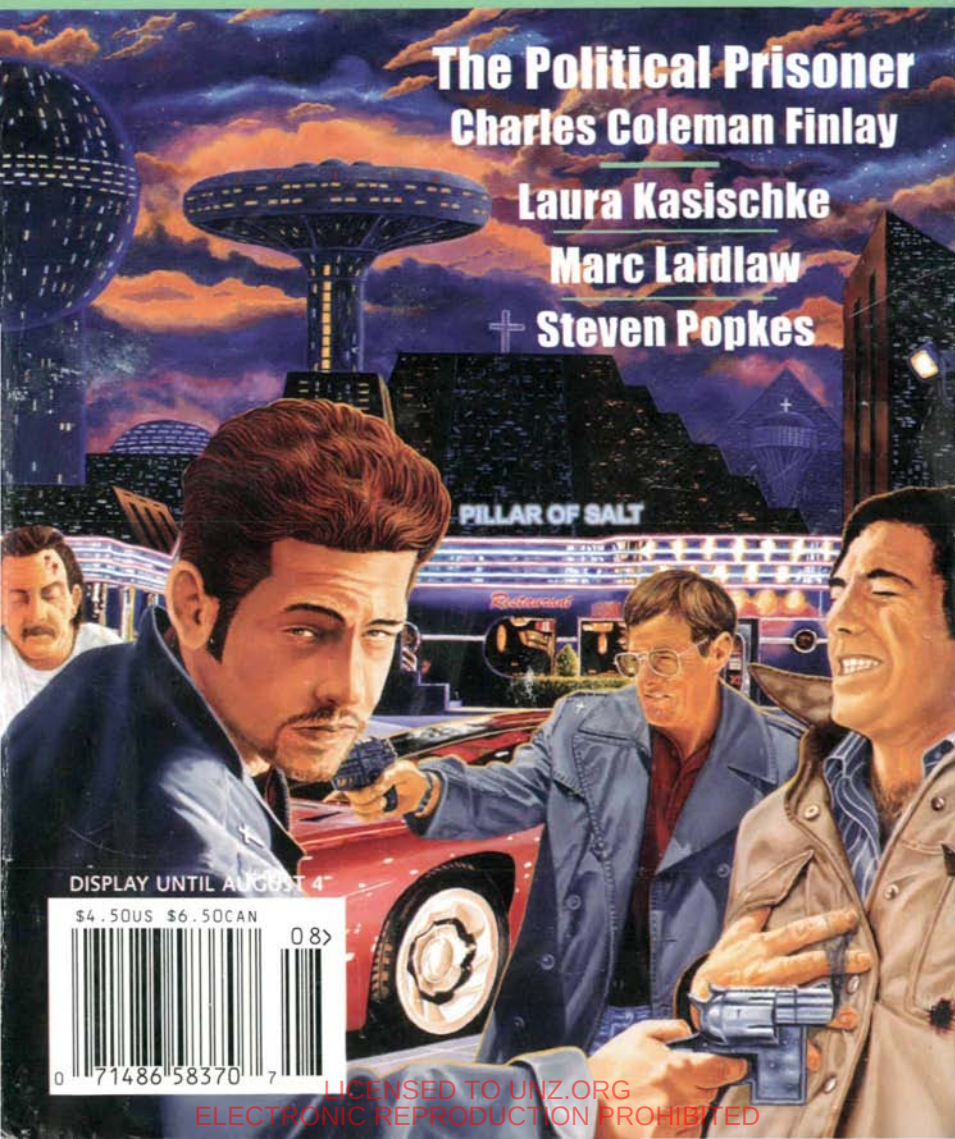

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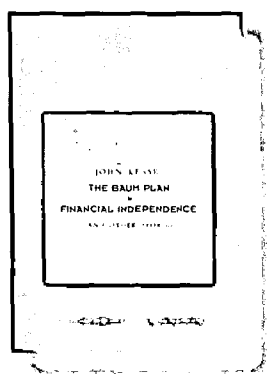

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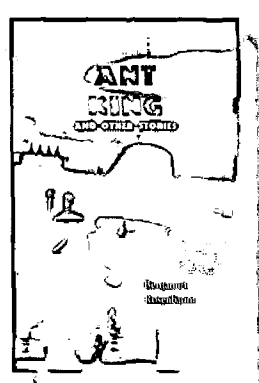

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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August • 59th Year of Publication

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 115, No. 2, Whole No. 675, August 2008. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $4.50 per copy. Annual subscription $50.99; $62.99 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, 105 Leonard St., Jersey City, NJ 07307. Periodical postage paid at Jersey City, NJ 07307, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.
Copyright © 2008 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.
Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

IN MY copious free time, when I'm not steering the good ship *F&SF* or trying to keep up with our two-year-old assistant editor (she already wields her red crayon like an old pro), I serve as an administrator for the Philip K. Dick Award.

The PKD Award pays tribute to Phil Dick's memory every year by honoring the best science fiction book published originally in paperback format. I've been one of the administrators since 1994 or thereabouts. In addition to presenting the winners their checks, the gig also encompasses fundraising, procuring books for the judges, and overseeing the whole judging process.

That judging process varies from year to year and one of these days I really ought to offer up some thoughts on the whole question of juried awards vs. popular awards. But right now, I want to tell you a bit about the judging process in 2007.

Our five judges used an online message board (private and password-protected...and no, the password wasn't "VALIS") to discuss the eligible titles as they read 'em. As usual, the judges agreed about some books, disagreed on others, and debated the meaning of the award. Business as usual. But as the year progressed, I found myself tuning in regularly just to read one of the judges' comments. They were articulate, well-reasoned, engaging, and backed by extensive knowledge of the field. Sometimes I agreed with 'em, sometimes I didn't, but they were always interesting,

In short, they were everything I look for in a book reviewer, so I spent six months biding my time so as not to affect the judging process. As soon as the judges had settled on giving the award (this year it went to to M. John Harrison for *Nova Swing*), I jumped in and asked Chris Moriarty to sign on as one of our reviewers.

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The name might not be familiar to you, since Chris hasn't published much short fiction, but both of Chris's novels — *Spin State* and *Spin Control* — were finalists for the PKD Award and the latter won. The former was also a finalist for the Spectrum and Prometheus Awards and earned Chris a nomination for the John W. Campbell Award as well. (Hmm, maybe I *should* use this editorial to discuss the various awards, if only to explain the difference between the John W. Campbell Award and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. On second thought, we'd be here all day if I started on 'em.)

So anyway, you'll find Chris's first column in this issue. Feel free to use our message board at *www.fandsf.com* to sound off about it... or anything else in the magazine.

A couple of notes about our reviewing process: our columnists are basically free to review whatever books they choose, so long as the books are appropriate for *F&SF*. (Much as I like Robert Sapolsky's science books and biographies of world leaders, I don't think *F&SF* is the venue for reviewing them.) Publishers and authors can always send books directly to our reviewers — and Charles de Lint's mailing address is always printed at the end of his column — but if you're thinking of sending a book to us for review consideration, your best bet is to send them here to us in Hoboken. We divvy up the titles every month and send them out to the reviewers so they won't all wind up covering the same two or three titles. Last month we received 134 different books.

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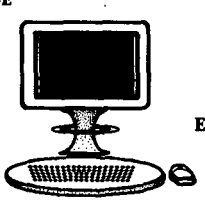

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Over the course of our fifty-nine years, F&SF *has published quite a few stories about bards, including Manly Wade Wellman's tales of John the Balladeer and Phyllis Eisenstein's Alaric stories. If Gorlen Vizenfirthe and his stone hand didn't come to mind at once when those other bards were named, it's probably because his two previous* F&SF *appearances slipped by you. (They were in our Oct/Nov. 1995 and Sept. 1996 issues if you want to look them up.) We're pleased to welcome him back after his long absence...and we promise that you'll be seeing more of him soon.*

Childrun

By Marc Laidlaw

THE FIRST THING GORLEN heard, as he mounted toward the walled village at the top of the rise, was the sound of children, their voices tumbling down the rutted track to greet him long before he saw a single villager. This meant his first sight of the pinched gray roofpeaks and ochre chimneyspikes above the wall came accompanied by the peculiar mix of dread and longing that he always felt at the sound of children playing. Were they laughing in delight or screaming in terror? It was an old question, and in the first and most memorable instance — when the correct answer had actually mattered — he had guessed wrong. He had lived with that mistake ever since. It had been his sister's voice then, yes, and he had thought her carried away by laughter; but it was something far different that had carried her off to a place he had no real desire to follow. He hadn't understood his mistake until he'd heard the sound of his childhood home, nestled in a sandy cove along the Pavinine Coast, being crushed beneath the weight of a gargantoise that had chosen that spot and those tarry timbers for the construction of its spitdaub-and-driftwood

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broodpile, where it would lay its oozy eggs and nest and doze for seven days. The cries of his parents he never heard, although they must have made some noise before the witless immensity smothered them. After that, he heard only the crashing of waves, the snoring of the huge armored amphibian. It was no wonder the sound of unseen children caused a surge of emotion, for they recalled the very instant of his orphaning.

That was one song he had never written, it occurred to him. A theme for which he could imagine no suitable tune to strum.

Why had he only thought of this now?

Perhaps it was the name of the village, crudely scratched in a marker of weathered wood, stabbed into the rocky soil at the side of the path:

CHILDRUN

A designation based upon an ancient misspelling, enshrined by years? A founder's surname? Or perhaps a place with long runs like those for kenneled hounds, devoted to the cartwheels of lively tykes? Or it might be based upon some other etymology, a rustic homophone, completely unrelated to youngsters.

At any rate it was a name, and the walled village promised rest, food, some coins to be earned sitting by a tavern fire strumming his eduldamer. He had been many days in these drear defiles, spat upon from unseen heights by green sleet and mossy gravel, wondering if the trail he'd picked would ever lead him anywhere. He'd found no sign of the hard black mineral supposedly mined by gargoyle sculptors in these mountains, which meant he might as well turn back. But he needed replenishment. Green mold covered his remaining bread and cheese, rendering them indistinguishable from one another. He prayed that even if Childrun's folk were illiterate, there might be some seasoned chefs among them. This thought quickened his step.

The city was gated, far from unusual in these lands; and the gates were locked, which was somewhat stranger. Childrun had the look of a place beseiged, although it was far from apparent what it might contain worth subjecting to attrition.

He eventually discovered a small bolt-hole plugged with a wooden block on which he rapped as hard as he could. Given that his right hand

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was entirely formed of polished black stone, this amounted to a fair bit of noise.

After a moment, the block was withdrawn and a lumpish face appeared narrowly framed in the stone slit. "*Ull*?"

"Gorlen Vizenfirthe, my good man, wandering bard, practiced mainly in eduldamer but not afraid to admit the occasional smokebag solo is also something of a specialty, provided you supply one. I can hardly carry the apparatus on my own, you understand. I travel alone and lightly equipped, seeking only secure lodgings and permission to regale your neighbors with such tunes as I have collected along my route or devised myself."

"*Owzzat*? *Grroff!*"

"Perhaps I might" (here, unstrapping his eduldamer, swinging it down so it lay across his abdomen, and striking the keys sharply with the side of his black stone hand to bring out a bright harmonic like a shaft of sunlight cutting between the darkening mountain ridges) "offer a sample of select favorites?" But before he could get more than a few bars into "The Laggard's Weal," the wooden chock snugged straight back into its slot. The face was gone.

Gorlen took a step back, two, and looked up at the wall that kept him from his potential customers. Appealing to the guard was anything but; this was not a soul he could hope to touch with music, or not his brand of it anyway. But still, down from the heights came the sound of children, and he suspected that if their sound could reach him out here, his might reach them in there.

Leaning against the threshold, he began to play with abandon — not a drinking song such as he might have employed to win the guard's affection, nor a sophisticated tirundel, but a simple cheerful melody, accompanied at full voice. It was one part of a rondel, incomplete, fairly begging for other voices to join it. It was the aural equivalent of a sugarfrost vendor's cart bell, jingling down the lanes of a sweaty summer city. Not a child had been born who could keep from running to such a sound.

And indeed, there was a hitch in the juvenile clamor. The screams and shouts of the children faltered at one pass, as if all had been playing together in the same courtyard; as if they had heard the music swirling and fallen silent in unison. He softened the rondel a notch, so they would have to move closer if they wished to hear him better. Gorlen kept one ear

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attuned for the sound of footfall; and although his ears were keen indeed, he heard no rush of children. What he heard instead was something harsher — a raw braying sound, coarse and greedy, that went on and on. He heard the children no longer. Perhaps they had all run inside, safe into their houses, away from this horrible din. His own playing, he realized, had also fallen off...although involuntarily. He bent his whole being toward making something of the sound, and even gave serious consideration to turning and striding quickly away from Childrun.

For better or worse, the decision was made for him by the movement of the sealed gate, which now swung outward, opening. The same porridgey face he'd seen before, framed by a thick rough swaddling of coarse black wool, in cowl and cloak, swam up between the halves of the gate. "*Marmsesgetin.*"

Gorlen parsed this sentence as best he could, wondering at first if he had strayed farther than he'd realized in recent days, then recognizing a semblence of known speech in the dialect. He had not traveled these mountains before, but the speech betrayed some similarity to that of regions he knew well.

"Ah...I thank you," he replied, stepping swiftly through the gate, only to be drawn up short by the sight of "Marm."

"I do apologize," said the pale young woman in her bright taut cap and beige floral skirts. There were ribbons about her head, and these in combination with the design of the headdress tipped him instantly to her profession. "Are you truly a traveling bard? For if so, you see, what luck! Please say that was you I heard playing the eduldamer. And was that not a round I heard? It has been so long. Please say it was you."

"I will say almost anything you wish," Gorlen responded, "and more besides, if you will give me the honor and pleasure of playing for you and your charges this evening."

Her eyes grew wide. They were very green except where flecked with bits of copper. Also coppery were the strands of hair that mingled with the ribbons of her cap.

"Am I correct in my intuition, Marm? That you are indeed the schoolmistress of this fortunate town?"

"You are indeed," she said. "But fortunate in what way?"

"Why, to have you in such a position."

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Gorlen felt himself becoming carried away, and when she blushed, he sensed where this day would almost certainly lead him. So as not to leach away his luck, he bowed humbly and said, "Please do not think me untoward. I have seen caps of similar style in other towns, and I believe those ribbons, almost as pretty as your eyes, each indicate a formal mastery of educational subjects. So many, in fact, that I must put myself in the position of envying your students."

"Well," she said, with a sudden darkening of demeanor, "there is nothing to envy in that regard, as I fear you soon will see. For these ribbons, Mr...."

"The Vizenfirthe is too unwieldy. Please do not trouble yourself with it. 'Gorlen' is the name I long to hear you utter."

She gave him a sidelong glance, askance, and slipping her hand through his arm, began to lead him up a dim lane as the gate clanged shut behind them. "You are rather forward, Mr. Vizenfirthe."

He tore his eyes away from a waxy red cylindrical talisman that hung from a leather cord around her neck, like a stubby scarlet wand marked with crescent imprints. Recalling himself, he said, "Ah! How lovely that sounds when you say it! I had always thought it a ghastly, bulky inconvenience of a name, but on your lips...."

She giggled. "Please. This way."

"Do I then have you to thank for my admittance?"

"Indeed. I heard your music. I could hardly let that pass. Although I fear you may end up wishing I had. Oh, I hope you do not resent me in the end."

"Unlikely. I will go so far as to commit myself to an emphatic *impossible*! I am here to play for you and all who'll hear me."

"Thank you. Thank you so very much." And she squeezed his arm with great appreciation.

It was about this time, as she led him up through steep winding streets, through many turnings that would have defied even a concentrated attempt at memorization, that he noticed how closely they were being watched. Not from every doorway, stoop or window, but from most of them; from half-ajar doors, from shabby curtains flicked momentarily aside, from peepholes and deep within alleys. Everyone stared as he passed, and he was immensely grateful for her company — her protection. He realized:

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"Great goodness! I have divined your occupation, but not your name!"

"Ansylla," she whispered, in a voice that acknowledged his fear for his safety was not unjustified. "Ansylla Chordacio."

"Let me speculate, Ansylla, that strangers are not often seen in this town; and when they are, hardly welcomed." This certainly put holes in his plans for sitting freely in a tavern. In such an environment of hostile suspicion, one might find nothing but resident inns.

"It was not always thus, I regret to say, but recently...over the last some odd years — in fact most of the time since my own arrival — it has been more and more as you perceive."

"You are not then a native?"

"Dear no. I was born in Riverend — "

"Ah, the Spiral Bridge!"

"You know it? Splendid! You will almost certainly have more recent tales of my home than I can recollect...I hope you will share them this evening."

"My pleasure. But how came you — "

"After my education, in the Academy at Currish, I was hard pressed to find any post. I confess this was the first that came my way, and I had not the luxury of waiting for a more glamorous assignment."

"Very pragmatic."

"So I have been told. If I were more idealistic I might not have come, I suppose. Or I might have left here by now. But I feel a certain devotion, to my charge. If not for me, well...what then?"

Her face had grown so thin that he did not wish to push her down this avenue. They were near the top of the town now, and coming toward a tall steepled building built of unpainted boards, its shingles warped and green with moss, of a design so different from that of the residences that he took it for the schoolhouse.

"Now," she said, "you have gratefully offered to play for us, so I must first make the offer worth your while. If you will perform, then I can offer you board at the school. There is plenty of room, and more than enough food."

"You not only educate but feed your pupils as well?"

"The townsfolk provide ample fare, as you will see. Now, if we have time before the meal, it might be best...."

The square before the schoolhouse was busy with villagers coming

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and going. On a long table before the front door they were laying out gifts of food like offerings. Pies and loaves of fresh baked bread; pies and more pies. It did not seem a particularly balanced diet for the needs of growing children, although certainly it was to the taste of any child. And although Gorlen himself these days preferred savories to sweets, the sight of such a sprawling dessert evoked childhood fantasies of living in a world made entirely of edible treats. Had he come on some festival day?

Whatever the occasion, it would be hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between the grim, shifty-eyed burghers with mouths like twisted scars, and the merry cream-slathered trifles they set by the board, before darting off resentfully into the shadows.

Ansylla gave a short sigh and took a large ring of keys from her flowery pocket, then wrestled briefly with the massive front door. The villagers tipped their hats to her and pretended not to notice Gorlen, who began to contemplate the potential for an outdoor recitation. However, he did not wish to be rewarded entirely in pies.

"Would you mind?" she asked, balancing massive pastries in each hand. Gorlen, not wishing to draw attention just yet to his immobile right hand, slipped his wrist through the handle of a basket loaded with sweetpuffs and fruit tarts, while gathering up a twiggy bundle of brittle sugar-faggots in the other. He went behind her down a dark hall, then out into a somewhat brighter classroom with hazed windows on its far wall. School desks, stools, and benches were pushed back to make room for a long communal table. She set her burden down on the large table, then returned to the street to bring in the rest of the pastries left by the townsfolk. Gorlen followed her example.

Only when they had retrieved the last pasty, and shut the door to the street, did he realize it had been some time since he had heard the children shrieking. He presumed they had been called in by their parents, but the conduct of their teacher made him wonder if they might be bent to their studies. In which case, who was instructing or supervising them? And quite apart from the laughter, what of the horrid sound that had interrupted it in the first place?

The walls of the classroom were lined with faded drawings. Whatever children had drawn these were apparently limited to pigments mined from the dreary mountains that surrounded them. Smudgy strokes of cinnabar and

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lead, drab yellows, fingerpaintings done in mud. All color had leached from the place. Gorlen had never spent any of his own childhood inside a schoolhouse, but he had seen plenty of them in his travels, and it was rare to find one not done up in colors meant to match the cheer of the children. Here, he saw tackheads holding nothing but shreds of old torn paper, imperfectly removed. He wondered what the children he'd heard could have found to laugh about in such confines.

"Now," she said tentatively, taking his elbow again, "bring your instrument, if you will, and come through here."

At the far side of the classroom were two small dingy windows, and centered between them, a door. He thought he heard the murmur of voices on the other side, children in conversation, muffled whispering. But as Ansylla put her hand on the knob and turned it, as the old hardware creaked, the voices stifled instantly.

He found himself staring out into a flagstone courtyard, completely surrounded by windowed walls, with one antique, etiolated willow mourning in a corner.

In the center of the court, where the children must have once come to frolic between lessons, was but one child.

The destination of all those pies was suddenly obvious. The boy was immense, his eyes small and black, his mouth wide enough to more than earn the appellation "batrachian." A few strands of lank black hair lay damp across his domelike brow, and but for those strands he was entirely hairless. He also lacked a neck. The child reminded Gorlen of nothing so much as a huge egg, peeled and incompletely boiled. Squatting in the midst of the courtyard, it devoted all its energy to not tipping over. Fat legs jutted out like the points of a broken tripod. Gorlen realized the boy was leaning back against a second willow, this one completely stripped of leaves and most of its branches. A reminder of greener days, it served the child as a scaly gray prop.

"Here we are!" Ansylla said brightly, and he did not understand the reason for her merriment until he realized she was not speaking to him but to the child, as one would speak to a very young and temperamental babe, or to an idiot. The child's behavior instantly confirmed his conjecture, for as soon as she spoke, it began to bang its heels against the flags and set the bare twist of willow shaking violently.

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Gorlen would have held back, but she held firmly to his arm and tugged him forward.

"I've brought you something wonderful today," she said. "Music! Lovely, lovely music! Did you hear it a little while ago? I thought you had. I thought for certain I heard you calling. Isn't that right? Oh, isn't that so?"

She turned to Gorlen with a wide smile, grinning and nodding at him until he could only nod and grin back like a lunatic, understanding none of it. Were they to humor the repellent child?

"Now this nice young man," she said, "is a bard. He's the one you heard! See this lovely instrument he holds, with its strings and polished wood? That is called an eduldamer. *E-dul-da-mer!* Now, he is going to play his eduldamer and sing you a song, one I'm sure you'll like. You will like that, won't you?"

The egg regarded them with watery confusion. Then it began to bleat.

He recognized the sound as a very gentle warning of the greater horror he had heard from outside the gate. No wonder the other children had ceased their play and fled when this monstrosity began to wail.

"No, no!" she said, deftly swooping in to take one of the child's tremendous hands and begin to pat it. "He'll play now, and you'll eat after, isn't that all right? You always like to sleep after you eat, but you wouldn't want to miss this. We don't know how long Mr. Fizzinforth can stay. Let's hear him now, shall we, and then you can...then you can...Mr. Fizz...Gorlen, why don't you...why don't you...."

Truly, it was a sound that would have rattled anyone's concentration. He could hardly believe she submitted herself daily to such a force of ill nature. Gorlen stood his ground, although his one desire was to bury his fingers deep in his ears and back steadily away. Quickly he unslung his eduldamer and began to play — not the rondel he'd started on earlier, as there were no voices to join in, but a tune much simpler and more direct. A song of childhood; and in fact, one originating in the province of Twilk, whose capital was Riverend. When Ansylla realized he was playing it for her, she raised her eyes from her student and gave him a grateful glance. Nervously, she plucked the waxy red wand on its leather cord and began to gnaw at it, red shavings gathering on her teeth. He realized it was not a talisman but a crayon — a teacher's stylus for correcting student errors, arithmetic mistakes, the like. He had spent so little time in school that he'd hardly recognized it.

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As Gorlen played, the child watched him fixedly, his mouth pressed shut. There was grave suspicion in those eyes, although it was surprising to see anything in them, considering their resemblance to a crustacean's glossy black eyespots. The child lacked eyebrows, or apparently even lids, from which Gorlen could extrapolate joy or displeasure. But at least Ansylla looked relieved. He could not have been doing badly.

At least, that was, until one of his strings broke.

"One moment! With apologies!" he cried, and dug into his knapsack to pull out a coil of bright new wire.

He replaced the wire quickly, but he could feel those fat heels drumming at the flagstones and sense the child's growing impatience even as he hurried. In fear for his physical wellbeing, he overtightened one peg and struck a high sour note, and instantly regretted it.

The child threw back his head and wailed, howled like a mirewolf calling to its pack.

"Oh no, my dear!" cried Ansylla. "There, there, all will be well...just a moment, my dear, just a moment! The nice man will soon make the pretty music again, you'll see! Won't you, Gorlen?" Pleading in her eyes.

His ears now ringing with the shock of sound, he nodded mutely and began to play again, hoping this would calm the brute. And indeed, his strategy was effective to a point. The piercing wail cut off, but in its place was another sound, more disturbing: The sound of weeping.

It was a weird chorus of voices. Children's voices. If he closed his eyes, which he did to hide the face of the animated egg, he could almost imagine that the courtyard was full of distressed children. Yet they all had one source. It was an uncanny performance.

"There, there, happy now! Happy!" she said. And the tone of the voices began to change. The cries faded out, turning gradually more garrulous as Gorlen played, and soon he realized that this one throat had given rise to the sounds he'd heard outside the gate. The entire range of children's voices had emanated from this child.

Ansylla must have seen his dawning wonder, for indeed, it was a miracle that such lively and beautiful noise could pour from such a gullet. She must have felt her charge's mood had stabilized sufficiently that she dared to reach out and touch Gorlen lightly on the shoulder, with a nodded promise that all would soon be clear. Once he'd finished that song, he

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turned to a more festive birthday jig, in honor of all the pies spread out in the next room; and that in turn spurred him to laugh out the words to the "Pie-So-Long Song" for the first time in many seasons. By the end of it, he felt quite jolly, and Ansylla's mood had also lifted. As for the child...his mouth had closed in a sleepy grin, almost attractive in its elongated way, and the courtyard enjoyed the benefits of its master's contentment. Even the naked willow seemed relieved.

"Why don't we bring him something to eat?" she said, just above a whisper, wiping red wax from her two front teeth.

Gorlen went to this task with a will. Anything to put some distance between himself and the now peacefully grinning child, and to have a chance for a moment's conversation out of the lad's hearing. Back in the classroom, he loaded her arms with pies, and as he held the door to let her out into the courtyard again, he dared, "A moment, Ansylla, if you will...."

"Yes? He does not like to be kept waiting, Gorlen. He is sure to be famished."

"I'm sure not. I just...simply...is the child an idiot?"

She pursed her lips delicately. "We do not use that term in the Academy," she said. "He has been traumatized, no doubt, by the gradual disappearance of his many classmates; and never has he been completely what you would call normal. And yet...yet, he has wonderful gifts."

"Gifts?" These had not been at all apparent.

"Why surely you noticed. He is a splendid mimic!"

"Ah. The myriad voices. That is certainly remarkable."

"Yes, remarkable. We are fortunate to have him...although he is the only one left."

"What became of the others? I can't believe the Academy posted you here to care for a single child. And if I might say so, your current task seems more suited to a nurse or nanny than a highly decorated Marm. Your ribbons seem wasted, when your only charge is so...." He held off using any word she might find offensive. If "idiot" had been met with approbation, he could only imagine her response to "moronic."

"When I took the post, the school was full, and bustling. But that did not last long. I arrived just as a shadow had begun to fall across — "

But now a shadow fell across her features. From beyond the door, the

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beginnings of a titanic moan. The edge of greediness, beyond mere hunger, brought him again to the all-devouring sound that had come keening through the gate earlier that afternoon.

"We'd best...." She shrugged, with her burden of pies, and Gorlen opened the door.

A thin pink tongue darted from end to end along the mouth's extensive lower lip, like a lizard running back and forth along a mossy wall. Now he saw that the eye did indeed feature lids, for they drew open wide at the sight of the numerous pies. The black knobs protruded slightly, lending credence to his earlier suspicion of crustacean ancestry. He felt he had seen such eyes deep in the dark cracks that clove these forsaken mountains; usually these were watchers that shrank from light or movement, so that one never had any more than the vaguest impression of their form. Still, the white hands that came grasping for the pies were those of a pudgy child. And the way the child ate was purely human: Spoiled beyond belief. Human hunger, human gluttony, a childish human rapacity for self-indulgence. So very spoiled.

There were more loads of food to be carried out before the table in the classroom was cleared. One loaf, slightly less sugar-encrusted than the others, Ansylla held back for herself and Gorlen. The rest went into the cavernous pit of her pupil's mouth. Maw. Gorge. Such words came readily to mind as Gorlen watched him eat. It was a squeam-inducing sight. One benefit of the heavy traffic into that mouth was that sounds ceased emitting from it, other than the noises of gulping, gnawing, and slobbery mastication. The troubling echo of a children's chorus did not intrude on the meal, for which Gorlen was obscurely grateful, although he could not have said why. There was something horrible in the cosmic indifference upon that vast visage, something wholly at odds with the spontaneous clatter of excited remembered voices.

"So...a mimic, you say. And these sounds...."

They were gathering up empty pie tins, old cracked plates, bread baskets, and retreating with them back into the classroom. The table was heaped with the remains of the child's meal.

"The cries of his schoolmates, yes. He makes them to amuse himself, I believe, for he is so stricken and lonely. This is his way of expressing feelings of loss. Can you not hear how forlorn those calls are? He has such

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a remarkable talent that at times I can almost make out the individual voices of his classmates...my former pupils. How they used to play around him, right here in this very yard. Between lessons, such energy, such bright times.... It could not have failed to make an impression on him, although he was much as you see him now, seeming to take little note of those around him. But I can hear it in the cries. How much he misses them. It is a forlorn mimicry, is it not?"

Loading his arms with empty platters and pans, Ansylla motioned him down the hall to the front door. Gorlen followed, but his mind was far from the chores of cleaning.

"It certainly gulled me when I first heard it," he said. "I thought the village overrun by children."

"That is what it sounded like when I first arrived. He replays their sounds endlessly, and in endless variations. It is his only pleasure. Besides eating."

"I was going to mention that as the more obvious source of satisfaction." He realized he had not completely expunged a tone of ironic judgment from his voice.

"Yes...he is spoiled," she quietly conceded, hesitating before she opened the door into the square. "The villagers cannot help themselves, and I can hardly blame them. He is the last child, after all. If they were to lose this one, what would they have left to hope for? What future? So...I do my best. That is why I cannot leave. I have grown accustomed. Attached, even. And besides, the Academy has no other postings for one of my limited qualifications."

She opened the door, admitting the dim light of early evening. The square was quiet but not unpopulated; in fact, a small crowd of citizens had gathered at the edges, and seemed to be watching with great interest as Gorlen followed her out into the light and set his clattering load upon the common table. Several of the villagers came forward to reclaim their housewares. They gave him sullen, even hostile looks, before trudging off to their cheerless, childless homes. These were the parents, he realized. Who else but the bereaved would have bothered to feed such a child unless they saw in him some connection to those they had lost? He could not imagine what they must have felt, hearing their children's shrieks parroted back to them, forever beyond reach. He felt a pang of pity for the whole

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village; but was still relieved to retreat into the schoolhouse and pick up the thread of their conversation.

"So you have considered changing locations?" Gorlen asked.

"Why deny it?" She shut the door and turned, putting her back against it, a look of resignation aging her prematurely. "This was hardly what I pictured even in my most despairing moments, when it seemed the Academy was sending us into a world that had no use for education, no interest in the betterment of its children, a world proud even of its own ignorance."

"Well, well," said Gorlen. "We must do something about this. No situation can be considered permanent. My way may take me through other towns that would almost certainly use you better. That red crayon of yours needs errors to correct! If you like, if you...trust me, that is...I would be happy to carry your credentials, to tout your qualities to any town with something more to offer than this dreary place."

"I...I think I do trust you, Mr. Vizenfirthe."

"Again, Ansylla. My name is Gorlen." And he touched her cheek with his left hand. This caused her to glance down at the right one, which he had so deliberately not used.

"There is a story there," she said quietly, "is there not?"

"There is, but too long to be told in even one long night."

"And you...will be traveling on in the morning?"

"There's little call for a bard here, and I suspect your student will soon grow weary of me."

She nodded, admitting the truth of this. Gorlen figured that the allure of anything but more pie would quickly pale on that particular child's appetite.

"And this hand of yours," she said, reaching down to take his right, "is it the only part of you so formed?"

"Of cold hard stone, you mean? Yes. The rest of me is warm. And soft. Mostly."

Upstairs were several rooms belonging to the schoolmarm, which must once have seemed a luxury of suites for a young teacher fresh from the Academy. There was little joy in them now. She fixed them a small supper, a salad of shredded roots, with crumbling cheese and the loaf of

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bread she'd spared from the child's repast. The child himself, as she had foretold, followed his meal with a sudden torpor and had made no further sound. Gorlen found himself thinking hard as he sopped vinegar from the salad bowl and sucked it from the softening crust of bread. Such a gift of vocal mimicry was common among certain creatures, although one associated it more with birds, of course. There was nothing birdlike about the child, except his exaggerated resemblance to some kind of soft-shelled egg. And for a creature with such a finely tuned ear for subtle gradations of human speech, it was odd that the child had never attempted to sing or hum along with Gorlen's tunes. The eduldamer's notes, or at least the songs Gorlen sang in accompaniment, would have made a fine subject for emulation. But perhaps the act of mimicry relied on some sort of traumatic episode to force imprinting. The absence of his classmates had caused the child to recall them in the only way available to him. Which thought led Gorlen to the obvious question...although he refrained at first from asking it.

Ansylla was lovely by firelight, and lovelier still when she untangled the vocational ribbons from her copper locks and put aside her teacher's cap. Only her red crayon she did not shed, which he had to admit he found rather charming. He did not want to ruin the mood by probing Childrun's no doubt depressing history. A gloom of loneliness pervaded the town. If he could do anything to push it back, to illuminate even this one room, he meant to do so. He played the eduldamer and spoke of Riverend as he'd last seen it, as it had always been, a creased valley deep in the Shalled Mountains, where the river in question, namely Gharrousel, came down from perpetually snowy peaks, passed under the ancient Spiral Bridge, and fell away abruptly and entirely in a whirlpool. The swirling funnel churned away forever, swirling endlessly down a vortex that carried it away beneath the earth. It was a place where those who wished to forget things went to forget them. Jilted lovers wrote the names of their ex-partners on vellum boats and sailed them into the current. That was one romantic use. Other riders of the spiraling waters, only slightly less frequent, were the spurned lovers themselves. But in a far less dramatic manner, the maelstrom had also taken in rotten fishheads without number and the contents of countless garbage bins. He had heard of the beauty of the whirlpool throughout his life; but no one ever mentioned the

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copious rubbish and fetid debris strewn along its cobbled banks. She laughed at his story, which was nothing new to her; but a memory shared shines brighter for it, and he could see the thought of her home warming her in all her parts. Nor was his talk of lovers completely innocent, or without result.

It was not very long before they dozed together, in an afterglow that seemed to permit more direct questioning than he had earlier dared. And indeed, no longer in fear of scaring her off, he broached what was surely the most terrifying subject of all.

"What happened to the other children?" he asked as he lazed. She was idly scribbling red spirals on his chest, lying over him with her red crayon dangling. "You said they went gradually, yet...how?" And as if this were not enough to start the conversation, he could not keep himself from asking the flood of questions that had been crowding in his mind all evening: "And how is it you came to take sole charge of the lad? Where are his parents?"

"He was a foundling, I am told. Left at the village gates in a night when the mountain streams ran to flood. This was only a short time before my own arrival here, but the most popular conjecture is that he was mothered by some impoverished woman, scarce able to feed herself. You must have noticed the harshness of the terrain along your way."

"A stingy country indeed," Gorlen agreed. "And yet generous in finding such a village to take him in. Although I imagine they were glad enough to accept an orphan, when their own offspring were disappearing."

"Oh, but none had been carried off just yet. That commenced after my arrival."

"I guess you are fortunate they have not blamed you for the disappearances!"

He found her soft fingers suddenly covering his mouth. "Do not even jest about such things! Do you not think that fear has gnawed at my heart since the first child vanished? Yet the villagers blame me not; they are most emphatic about this. There has always been another event to blame for the vanishing, and in each case they have felt their guilt to be greater than anyone else's, for not seeing the signs, for not doing all they could to prevent it."

"And what event was this?"

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"I know it is not at all apparent from the town's demeanor in this dark time, but once the village turned a friendly face to the world. The gate was always open. Travelers were common. Thus it was when I arrived. But gradually we realized that every child's disappearance was linked to the arrival of...a stranger."

Gorlen felt a chill beginning, different from any foreboding he had felt so far in Childrun. Less sourceless now; something very like an icy accusatory finger that had begun to tap upon his bare shoulder.

"What...which stranger?"

"Oh, no particular sort. Not at first. It could have been anyone. But after the third disappearance, we noticed that always there was someone about, someone unseemly, someone never seen here before, who appeared one day and disappeared the next. He might have been a merchant or a tinker, a peddler, a wandering monk. As I say, at first we suspected no one. But gradually we — well, I mean, they — began to suspect everyone. Every strange face that appeared was suspect of being the next abductor. Still, the village's innate hospitality held sway. All visitors were welcomed, even though with less open gladness than before. This was only natural, for as sadness took hold, it began to cover the whole village with its shadow."

"So...any sort of stranger wandering through...a bard, perhaps...."

"I do not recall a bard ever before," she said. "Not in connection with a child's disappearance. It is strange, now that I speak of these things for the first time in many months, that we have never uncovered any connection between these isolated strangers. Nothing, that is, apart from the fact of a child's abduction."

"It seems a very fragile thread from which to hang an accusation against someone you...scarcely know." He realized he was slowly drawing away from her beneath the coverlets, and estimating the whereabouts of his scattered clothes. "And these strangers, what...what became of them?"

"Why, nothing, of course. They vanished in the night. Along with the children! That is why eventually the villagers came to see such a clear connection between the two events. But as their grief grew, so did their unwillingness to let this happen again. Thus they took to locking the gate even during the day, as you have seen."

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Gorlen sat up and slowly pulled on his garments. She watched him quietly. "Why do you rise at this hour?"

"As a stranger in this place, I find myself suddenly ill at ease," he said. "Say I wished to try the gate at this hour of the night? Do you think I would be permitted to leave?"

"I very much doubt it. Not, at any rate, until the whereabouts of all the children..." She giggled. "...which is to say, the child, had been verified. That would only take a short time, however. And then I'm sure all would be well."

Gorlen was not able to share her certainty, especially now that he was quite sure he heard stealthy shuffling steps somewhere nearby. The chamber had one small lozenge window, which he unlatched and opened a very small amount, having first ascertained that the room's one lamp had been snuffed. He peered out through the slit and found himself looking down on the public square where the villagers had heaped pies that afternoon. It was a dark night, moonless, but there was enough ambient light to show him that the square was thronged by darker shapes, all moving quietly, wordlessly, toward the schoolhouse.

He closed the door as quietly as he could. Then, stifling the strings, he picked up his eduldamer and slung it over his shoulder.

"Gorlen, where...?"

"I know you meant nothing by it, my dear, or at least I hope you did not, but I must now inquire as to the possibility of a back door from this place."

"A back...are you leaving then?"

"I'm afraid I must, my dear Ansylla. You may find nothing suspicious in my demeanor, but your villagers, I fear, are not so charitable. Now, meaning no harm, I must ask again — "

"There is no other door; that would have made it difficult to keep the children from slipping away unnoticed. However, a time or two, one spry child was known to climb the old willow in the corner of the yard, and thus gain the top of the wall. From there, alleys will lead you off through the town. But Gorlen, all the village gates are locked at this hour. And none will open while you are loose."

"Matters to trouble me another time," he said. "Hopefully, not so long from now. Now here, for you, a kiss." Sweet, so sweet. She had begun

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to rise and pull her own raiments on. "And now, I must be off. I will carry word of your academic expertise to other towns, I promise, and soon perhaps you will hear from another of these institutes. One with a more wholesome student body, I would hope."

With that he slipped into the hall and headed for the stairs.

The villagers must have considered the school their public property, for even as he reached the darkened classroom, he heard a key turning in the front door down the hall. But that was not his avenue anyway. He moved quickly to the courtyard door and let himself through. Out in the courtyard, cut off from whatever light reached the square, he found himself in utter darkness. He stood very still for a moment, trying to recall the layout of the place from that afternoon. A simple rectangle, featureless except for the willow in the center and the other in the corner, which ought to be at his left hand now. If he crept straight ahead till he reached the far wall, and then moved left, he would surely find the corner and the tree with its promise of escape.

Taking short shuffling steps, he advanced very slowly, trying to ignore the sounds growing louder beyond the classroom door. He glanced back once, and heard a murmur of muffled voices, and then a dim light bled across the dingy glass, as if someone had struck a match or lit a weak taper. Shuffle-shuffle a few more steps, and suddenly he realized the light was growing brighter. Bright enough to see his own shadow forming ahead of him on the flagstones. Surely he had not reached the far wall, and yet his shadow ended abruptly and flung itself up on a pale smooth surface...too smooth and pale to be the opposite wall. Behind him, the door was creaking open. Ahead of him, the light it let loose glimmered briefly on two glossy black knobs, set in the pale wall like handles he might seize to pull himself aloft. But these eyes went up and up above a growing darkness vast and complete enough to steal his shadow. His toe caught on a rubbery edge or, more aptly, a lip; and because in spite of himself he had started to panic and to hurry, his momentum carried him forward, off balance, and over he pitched into the pitchy black.

He lay there a long moment with his eyes shut, waiting for the villagers to set hands upon him, to drag him back into the classroom, to begin to do whatever it was they did to the strangers they caught in their midst. With one child left in the town, one child to spoil and protect with

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all their number, he suspected they had very few reservations when it came to dealing harshly with strangers. After all, they had prevented this last child from being abducted for...for how long now? He had never thought to ask. Well, perhaps they would answer one simple question before thrashing the life out of him or pitching him into some cell where he might land upon the bones of other unsuspecting travelers.

But no hands fell upon him, and in fact he heard nothing now of his pursuers. The floor was wet and sticky, but not so far as he could tell with his blood. He was unharmed. He could not imagine why they had let him alone so suddenly, but he did not trust their reluctance or change of heart to last. He might as well find the willow while he was at it, and hoist himself over the wall, and see if it might not be possible to leave the village by way of rooftop scampering.

Shuffle-shuffle a few more steps, and then his paces grew longer. With his right hand out before him, he waited for the clink of stone against stone, but waited in vain. Soon he was striding briskly along, before he stopped in sudden realization of the vast interior into which he belatedly realized he must have strayed.

"Good grief," he said aloud, and thought: "He's swallowed me. Like one of his pies."

That blackness beneath the beady eyes could have been nothing but the child's enormous mouth. The notion was so right that he wasted not a moment disputing it, but immediately tried to turn exactly half a turn around, and head back in precisely the opposite direction he'd been heading. But suddenly the ground, which had felt so level before, seemed a slope, and a sheer upward one at that. The darkness was designed to disorient him. And in his reluctance to become a willing participant in his own further ensnarement, he stopped and immediately sat down.

This would take some thought. Some cunning. Neither of which emerged out of panic or panicked flight. The best thing to do, as always, was to give himself time to think, and a way of evoking his deeper mind, the cleverer nature of which ran dark and unseen but still quite tangibly beneath his ordinary surface thoughts. This lower tide of wise cunning he equated with the improvisations of music, for they were much the same.

His eduldamer found its way into his lap, and he began to strum and play, stretching out calming patterns of sound through which he might

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weave patterns of thought substantial enough to support more weight.

The unexpected result of his song was not, as he had hoped, the quieting of his own thoughts, but the sudden raising of other sounds from all around him.

Voices began to call out. Worried, cautious, questioning. "Who's there?" "What's that, do you hear it?" "Is it real then, the music? Do you all hear it, too?" "I thought it was only me, but...but it's not. It's real. It has to be real."

Gorlen silenced the strings and listened, afraid that he himself was imagining only what he might have wished to hear.

They were children's voices, and as the music stilled, they grew more plaintive.

"Noooo!"

"It's stopped!"

"Why did it stop?"

"Please, no!"

Gorlen strummed again, and then began to hammer and slide on the strings. All the voices fell quiet. He played for several minutes before breaking off to say, "The music you hear, it's real. I'm real! None of us could have imagined this!"

The darkness was full of gasping, amazement. He could almost see the awestruck eyes of children gaping through the dark. But of course, he could not. He had only sound to go by. Fortunately, he was expert in its uses.

"Where are you all?" he asked.

"Where are any of us?" called one voice. "Inside. The same as you."

"No, but...I mean, where inside? Are you together? Are you near me?"

"Those things mean nothing here," said another voice, older than the first, more worldly and despairing. "We're just lost in here. All of us. Forever. We've given up. You'll give up soon, just like the rest of us. Stop looking and trying to find each other."

Several younger voices pitched in for a moment. "No! Stop! I want my Mummy...."

"Your mum's not here, none of 'em's here or ever will be here, so shut your bawling."

But that only made it worse. Several young wailing voices carried

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through the dark, while older voices groaned in misery. "Now you've done it!" complained the strong clear voice of an older girl. "There, there, dears, don't listen to him! He only wants to make you cry. Same as ever — a bully, even in here."

"I'm no bully. I've hurt no one," the petulant boy replied. "I just don't like 'em making it worse than it is when it's already bad enough."

"It wouldn't be that bad if it weren't for you always telling them how bad it is."

"Me? What about you!"

"I never — "

Gorlen cut through the bickering with a plucked high note, which he held and shook so that it bound the dark together with one pure sound.

"Do you all hear that?" he asked, as the note faded.

Scattered murmurs of assent floated back to him. It sounded as if they were all around him in the dark.

"That's what we need," he said. "We need to move together, if we wish to get out of this place."

"Out! You obviously haven't been here very long. There is no out. There is no place. This is all of it, mate."

"Shut up," said the girl who'd stood up to the bully before. "Just listen to him. He's making more sense than you have in a long time."

"You need to stop arguing," Gorlen said. "You need to start listening. Just listen to the music. And...move toward it. I'm going to play now, all right? I'm going to play and I want you, all of you, to just come toward the sound."

"We've tried this before," someone said, "we've tried talking each other through it — "

"But this isn't talking," said another. "This is music. It's already different, can't you tell?"

"Exactly," said yet another.

"What do we have to lose?"

"Mummy!"

Gorlen played till their chattering subsided, and kept playing. He hummed along with it a bit, but realized the pure tones of the eduldamer were strong enough to summon them. They needed the unadulterated tones to make up for the loss of their most relied-on sense.

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It was quite some time before he admitted to himself that it was not working. The children began to state the obvious long before he could bring himself to agree with them. Silencing his instrument, he again sat and pondered the possibilities.

"Told you," said the sourest of the voices.

"Still, we had to try. There's been nothing else to try for the longest time."

"How long have you been here?" Gorlen asked.

"We don't know. How long is long? All we know is some have been here longer than others."

"I was the first," said the boy with the sour voice.

"I was last," said the smallest voice.

"And you came here...how?"

"He promised us things."

"He who?" Gorlen asked.

"The one we're in, of course. Before he swallered us up, he asked us to sneak in and play with him. He said he had secret things for us. He said to tell no one."

"He was clever. Teacher didn't know he could even speak! And he always waited till there was a stranger in town, so blame never fell on him."

"You've put this all togther, have you?" Gorlen said.

"What else have we to do but compare stories? Sit here in the dark and sulk and wait and talk and sometimes shout. We call and call but nobody hears us."

Gorlen thought of the children's voices he heard, attributed to the ugly child's gift for mimicry — actually owed entirely to his diet.

"And how do you live? What do you eat?"

"Oh Gods no, please don't say it — "

"Ugh, ew, no!"

"Don't talk of it...anything's better than — "

"PIE!"

He heard them gagging at the sound. "Huge chunks of it raining down on us...halves of pies, hunks of sweetened sourstem, meringues and creams and pickles...half-chewed, is the worst of it. But if you're hungry enough, you'll eat it."

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"I never thought I'd miss eating vegetables."

"Me neither!"

Gorlen thought of the voracious child, the huge mouth, and of the sound it made when it wailed for food. His thoughts turned to the first time he'd heard that horrid hunger, how it had swelled up and frightened off the sounds of other children while he was playing. And what was he playing? What had he done that caused the immense egglike being to drown them out, so they could no more hear the music than Gorlen could hear them?

Then he remembered: The rondel. The round. The choir waiting for voices to join it.

Perhaps it was not the music then.

"I have another idea," he said. "Something to try. Are you willing to try?"

"Does it mean eating pie?"

Gorlen chuckled. "Hardly." And mentally banned himself from ever playing the "Pie-So-Long Song" for this crowd. "Do you know what a rondel is?"

"Miss Chordacio taught us. She sings them. We know."

"Can you name one you all know?"

"A little while ago we heard one...heard someone singing...was that you?"

"I believe it was," Gorlen said. "I was singing for you, without knowing it. Would you like to sing that one?"

"Oh, we started to, but then the sound went away, we couldn't hear a thing when he started howling to drown it out. It was all that terrible sound in here, and then when it finally quit we couldn't hear you anymore."

"Well, you'll hear me now. What I want you to do is sing and not stop. I'll start you off, playing along with you, and then I'm going to do something else with my eduldamer. I want you to just listen to each other, keep the rondel going as long and as strong as you can, and ignore everything else. Do you think you can do that?"

"We can! Miss taught us! We're good at it."

"All right," Gorlen said. "Now, here goes."

He began to play the rondel he'd picked out earlier, weaving his voice

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through the tune. Voice by voice, the children joined him. This time, he felt the darkness solidify. He could hear their locations in the dark. Their own voices gave them a location, a bearing, by which they could make out their relation to the others. Without his even urging it, he could sense them moving closer to him, closer to each other, drawing in. The round of voices was sketching a tightening circle of beings as well. Voice by voice they drew themselves together, until he could feel them around him. He was at the center of the round, the voices swirling and spiraling, and it felt so solid he knew he could finally take his next step.

He silenced the strings, and waited to make sure the children would not stop for even an instant. They hardly seemed to notice the eduldamer's absence. Gorlen twisted the pegs, loosening some wires, tightening others. When he thought he had gauged things just right, he struck the strings with the edge of his gargoyle hand.

The racket cut through the seamless shifting beauty of the children's voice. It was a chilling, wracking sound, designed to set teeth on edge. The sort of noise that would make dogs howl.

Dogs and other things.

A slight tremor passed through the rondel, but it recovered instantly, even as Gorlen began to draw long screeching wails from his strings.

A larger tremor, verging on violent, passed through whatever it was he sat upon. With a grin, he twisted a peg and plucked a triad of disharmonious wires. The sound was almost agony, even for him.

Then came the howl.

Light suddenly shone in on them, as if a boulder had rolled away from the mouth of a cave. It was pale, wavery, like the glow of a distant candle; but his eyes were so steeped in darkness that even the faint illumination felt like the beam of a lighthouse sweeping over them. He could see the faces of the children, dozens of them, caught and lit up, eyes gleaming, mouths open in song. They all saw each other at the same time, and with the recognition came movement. They had gathered in a circle, like a manifestation of the rondel, and now they moved together, all as one, toward the light.

The glow began to dim, but Gorlen plucked the strings again and the brightness increased.

Ahead of them, he saw the courtyard now. He saw a couple lamps held

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in wavering hands. He saw faces, looking this way, and heard muffled shrieks of disbelief.

As they reached the threshold of the enormous howling mouth, more lamps were lit, and grieving parents, faced with hope, pushed forward in shock. The children could contain themselves no longer. As they dashed forward, they let off singing; the rondel collapsed. Gorlen watched them rush into welcoming arms, there in the school courtyard, and ceased plucking.

The darkness sealed him in, the mouth nearly lopping him in two, but that he stumbled backward into darkness. His eduldamer fell from his hand. He saw it clatter onto the flagstones, just out of reach. Then the mouth sealed him in again.

That was a terrible moment, and an endless wait that might have been merely seconds. He had but one voice after all. He could not find his way out, alone.

But then the light came. Many hands, prying on the mouth, the adults of Childrun pushing bodily with all their strength, together opening a passage. And the voice of Ansylla, in her best stern schoolmarm intonation, ordering the disobedient child to "Spit it out right this instant!" There formed a tiny, niggardly passage through which he dragged himself.

Gorlen lay in the square for a moment, hardly believing he was free until he saw Ansylla leaning over him. The children, reunited; parents still running weeping to reclaim their lost young; and variations of one particular conversation:

"Come away now, love, Mummy will bake you a marvelous p — "

"Please no! No, Momma! Never again!"

"No more pie forever!"

In the end, only one orphan lay unclaimed, although hardly forgotten.

The child, so immense earlier that evening, was now a withered, flaccid sack of skin, hardly enough to fill a gentleman's cap. It resembled the shreds of a rubbery shroud. Gorlen thought he should be the one to go toward it, but as soon as he made a move in its direction, it drew itself across the courtyard like a shifting puddle. Disdaining to use the willow as a ladder, it wriggled its way up through cracks in the old wall and slithered over the top, heading toward whatever slimy rock-filled mountain fastness it had crawled out of.

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* * *

Ansylla Chordacio, her many ribbons fluttering, her pack of students accompanying them with great merriment and echoes of last night's rondel, kissed Gorlen on the cheek and linked her arm in his as they strolled out through the wide open gate. He would return the way he'd come and pick up another more promising path; that was the extent of his plan.

"I assume you no longer wish me to present your vitae at any future institutions I may come across?"

"Goodness no," she said, smiling down at her children, as if they were all her own. "I have more than enough work here to keep me busy. This is the job I came for. Now I can finally do it. Thanks to you, Gorlen." She kissed his other cheek. "The children and I and all of the villagers...well, you will be long remembered in Glour, I can assure you."

"Glour?" he said. "What is that?"

She stared at him, baffled. "Why...the village, of course. What did you think it was called?"

In reply, Gorlen pointed toward the sign barely in sight down the path.

"And what is that?"

"The village marker...."

"One moment." She turned to the children. "You wait here, children. I will be right back."

She walked with him down to the turning of the path, where he pointed to the sign that read CHILDRUN.

"There," he said. "The name of the village. I thought it might be a misspelling, but how do you get Glour out of that?"

She laughed into her hand. "I've never seen that there before. Someone fleeing must have put it there. Look again, Mr. Fizzenwurth!"

She leaned forward, tugging her crayon on the end of its lace, so that she could add two red corrective marks to the sign.

"It's not misspelled," she said, "simply poorly punctuated. Look."

CHILD! RUN!

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Mind the Gap by Christopher Golden and Tim Lebbon, Bantam, 2008, $12.

THERE'S something I really enjoy about the conceit of hidden people living on the edge of our own world, secret either because we don't pay enough attention to notice them, or because they're so good at staying off our radar.

It would seem that tiny people would have the easiest time staying hidden. As a kid I loved books like Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* series, or T. H. White's *Mistress Masham's Repose* with their diminutive characters living behind our baseboards or in secret cities. But there have been many books about full-sized hidden characters as well. In Christopher Fowler's *Roofworld,* the people live their lives never coming down to ground level. Neil Gaiman's characters have a whole other world below ground in *Neverwhere.*

I suppose the reason those last two examples came to mind is because Christopher Golden's and Tim Lebbon's *Mind the Gap* is set in London, England, and the city's been on my mind since I finished reading the book. Their hidden world exists in abandoned subway stations, deep underground (hence the title; "Mind the gap" is something you hear over and over again as you get on and off subway cars in London).

But while the city's the same, Golden and Lebbon have a whole other take from previous books touching the subject.

It opens with Jasmine "Jazz" Towne coming home from school. Her paranoid mother is forever passing along dire warnings to her about not trusting anyone, and has instilled in her numerous warnings about what to do if things go wrong. What might go wrong, she never explains, but they live an odd

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secluded life, looked after by mysterious "Uncles" who pull up to their house in big black cars.

Today Jazz has a weird premonition and instead of going directly into her house after school, she sneaks into the neighbor's place (he's off at work) and slips through a connecting passage that her mother had previously made as an escape route. (I told you she was paranoid, but — how does the saying go? Are you still paranoid when everybody *is* out to get you?)

Slipping into her bedroom from an attic hatch, Jazz discovers that the previously benevolent Uncles have killed her mother and plan to kill her. Why? She doesn't know. All she can do is read the words her mother has written in her own blood on the floor: "Jazz hide forever."

And then she flees.

But she has nowhere to go. There is nowhere safe. Not until she stumbles on a bunch of kids living in an abandoned subway station, far below ground, led by a Fagin-like figure. But the kids aren't the only ones living down below. There are also ghosts — spectres that Jazz can see and hear, while the others can only sense them sometimes.

Even though the community is Jazz's first taste of an extended family, all's not wonderful in the world below. The Uncles are still after her and they bring havoc in their wake. I loved the resolution of why Jazz is so important to so many people (it's not only the Uncles who want a piece of her), but I especially liked the choices she makes at the end and how it all plays out.

Golden and Lebbon do a wonderful job with this book, pulling you in with a strong opening and a likable protagonist in Jazz, and then maintaining the story with an array of mysteries and puzzles, and a cast of engaging characters.

This is the first book in a series, but the next will be in a different city, with different characters. On the strength of this opening gambit, I can't wait to read it.

Heart of Stone by C. E. Murphy, Luna, 2007, $14.95.

House of Cards by C. E. Murphy, Luna, 2008, $14.95.

And speaking of hidden people living close to, but not part of, our world....

I didn't even know that C. E. Murphy had a new series out until the second volume of it showed up in my P.O. box for review. After a

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quick trip to the bookstore for the first volume, I settled in to give it a try.

I liked her Urban Shaman series a lot. I know I complained in previous columns that I wanted its lead character Joanne Walker (the police mechanic who turns out to also be a shaman) to just get over it: There's magic in your world. You've been given absolute proof. Deal with it.

But I liked everything else about the series. The inventive storylines. Murphy's use of mythology and folktale. The mix of Native shamanism and Celtic folklore. The Seattle setting.

The new series ups the ante and gets everything right.

It's set in New York City, which if you don't live there (and maybe even if you do), seems the perfect place to have a bunch of secret Old Races living alongside humanity. There were five of them originally — dragons, djinns, gargoyles, vampires and selkies — and these days they are much diminished from their earlier numbers, especially the selkies. But they are still very much present.

Stumbling into their world is a young black lawyer named Margrit Knight. (I mention her race, because it plays into her firsthand understanding of the racial dynamics between the Old Races, as well as how they feel towards humans.)

What I like about Knight is that she's not a reactive character. She doesn't wait for things to happen to her; she goes out and makes them happen. It's also fun (and integral to the series) that she's a lawyer. She's the logical sort of person who doesn't believe in what can't be proved, but when the proof is offered, she doesn't waste any more time worrying about what's real and what isn't. She carries on.

That said, she's often in far over her head, but rather than being overwhelmed, she puts on her "courtroom face" and works through the situation.

In the first book that situation includes falling in love with Alban, a man who turns out to be a gargoyle and is wanted for murder. The main investigator on the case just happens to be Knight's ex, Tony Pulcella. Circumstantial evidence makes it look bad for Alban, but Knight is convinced of his innocence and sets out to prove it, a course of action that's complicated by having to keep secret exactly what Alban is, like the fact that he can fly and turns to stone at dawn.

Before Knight knows it, by trying to help Alban, she not only puts

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the relationships of her human life at risk, but she's also drawn into the complex jockeying for power and position among members of the other Old Races where a misstep can mean death.

It all plays out like a breath of fresh air over the course of these two books, with a third title due for release in the fall.

Murphy has a fine sense of pacing, her prose moves the story ahead, rather than simply calling attention to itself, and her dialogue crackles with true-to-life energy. But what I liked best about these books is the range of characters, and especially their range of emotion and motive. It's all shades of gray here, from the inhuman cast to the human.

Jumper: Jumpscars by Nunzio Defilippis, Christina Weir, and Brian Hurtt, Oni Press, 2008, $14.95.

Just an addendum here to previous reviews of Steven Gould's Jumper books. I finally saw the film based on them and while it's not nearly as good as the books, if you shut your mind off and go with the flow, it's at least entertaining. I don't think Gould did himself any favors by playing off the movie for his third book, rather than sticking to his own mythology (much like it annoyed me when David Morrell brought Rambo back from the dead for more books, without any explanation except to keep the movie franchise going), but that's not the point behind this.

Oni Press recently put out a prequel to the movie that focuses on the Paladins, trying to make them more human, with understandable motives. (In Gould's series and the movies, Jumpers are teleporters, while the Paladins are a clandestine organization that's been butchering them for years with a religious fervor.) It'd be like telling a story to show how the SS in WWII were really just people who happened to have an agenda most of the world disagreed with.

What really bugs me is that nowhere does it mention that this is based on work created by Gould, except — considering what a shambles they made of it — maybe that's a good thing for him.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

CHRIS MORIARTY

Pebble in the Sky, by Isaac Asimov. Tor, 2008, $24.95

The Null-A Continuum, by John C. Wright. Tor, 2008, $25.95

Lorelei of the Red Mist, by Leigh Brackett. Haffner, 2007, $40.

The Secret of Sinharat and *People of the Talisman*, by Leigh Brackett. Planet Stories, 2007, $12.99.

The Martian General's Daughter, by Theodore Judson. PYR, 2008, $15.

HOW DO you explain Isaac Asimov to Earthmen?

How do you even begin to describe that glorious union of all-American optimism, bleeding-heart Yiddishkeit, and cutting-edge science speculation? You can't. He's one of a kind—like all true miracles.

I suspect *Pebble in the Sky* held up better as hard sf back in 1950. Asimov kicks off the book with a D.C. Comics-style lab accident and some half-hearted handwaving about the "queer and dangerous crannies" in nuclear physics. You couldn't play this fast and loose with science today — not even if you sugarcoated the pill with a thick layer of closed time-like loops and entangled photons. Frankly, compared to Arthur C. Clarke's stories from the 1950s, *Pebble in the Sky* feels downright flimsy.

But who's complaining? The plot and characters are vintage Asimov, complete with a delightfully tongue-in-cheek cameo of alien tourism that I can't help suspecting was the inspiration for one of my favorite Hal Clement stories. When a shtetl-born tailor is transported to a future Chicago that has become a radioactive quarantine zone, he collides with a maverick archeologist who claims Earth is

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the origin point for all of humanity. Naturally, Earth's Imperial Procurator is skeptical. He protests (with classic Asimovian excess) that Earth is:

> a pigpen of a world, or a horrible hole of a world, or a cesspool of a world, or almost any other particularly derogatory adjective you care to use. And yet, with all its refinement of nausea, it cannot even achieve uniqueness in villainy, but remains an ordinary, brutish peasant world.

Foundation junkies will perk up at the Procurator's tone of imperial ennui. And indeed, *Pebble in the Sky* offers tantalizing glimpses of an earlier and marginally less decayed Galactic Empire. Psychohistory buffs will love this book for its through-the-looking-glass view of the *Foundation* series. And everyone else will love it because it's just fun, fun, fun.

A. E. van Vogt's pulp classic *The World of Null-A* ranks right up there with Asimov's *Foundation* novels and Herman Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* on my list of books to recommend to really smart teenagers. Not that they aren't fun for kids of all ages. But teenagers take a special joy in books that come complete with their own self-contained philosophical systems.

John C. Wright was clearly one of the smart kids who devour such books. And he obviously stumbled on *The World of Null-A* at exactly the right moment. The result is *The Null-A Continuum*.

The book's back cover copy is a pulp geek's dream, complete with claims that Wright (better known for his hard sf "Golden Age" trilogy than for his pulp credentials) "has trained himself to write in the exciting pulp style" so that readers can "return again to the Null-A future."

Happily, it's all bunk.

Null-A Continuum is no slavish copy. In Wright's hands, the pulp original turns into a pulp-meets-hard-sf meditation on cosmological evolution. Purists may howl, but in my opinion this is a good thing. Van Vogt was a short story virtuoso: a master of the firefly-bright idea that flashes and flickers and can be worked through in a dozen brilliant pages. His novels often feel a bit freeze-dried in the home stretch, as if he's lost interest in his characters and just wants to get the whole ordeal over with.

Wright, in contrast, is a born

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novelist. And *Null-A Continuum* is a novelist's novel, bristling with ideas and characters that demand novel-length treatment. It's also a thoroughly modern piece of work, heftier and yet more disciplined than the original *Null-A* books. The writing is smoother, the characters more developed, the science more rigorous, the...oh, why go on? What it all boils down to is that the original *Null-A* novels were pulp of the first water, while Wright's book is an erudite *homage* to the pulp tradition by a twenty-first-century hard-sf master.

Wright has retooled van Vogt's characters, plot, and science for today's readers. And though his love for the master is evident, he hasn't hesitated to put his own stamp on the *Null-A* universe. The science of the original *Null-A* books centered around the characteristic science ideas of the 1940s: the threat of nuclear war, the vision of vast, centralized bureaucracies run by ENIAC-style thinking machines, the hope that hypnosis could unlock the hidden powers of the human mind. In contrast, Wright's scientific concerns are those of today: the cosmological implications of new discoveries in physics and astronomy; the untrustworthiness of memory; the extreme pressures placed on humans as we leave behind the environment to which our evolution has adapted us.

How you feel about Wright's book will depend on how you feel about the differences between the pulp of yesteryear and the hard sf of today. If you're looking to relive the experience of reading van Vogt for the first time, you'll just have to settle for reading van Vogt a second time. But if you're interested in what one of the smartest hard sf writers of our generation has to say about the universe of *Null-A*, then Wright's *Null-A Continuum* will let you get your geek on.

If Asimov's and van Vogt's speculations were rendered obsolete by subatomic physics, then Leigh Brackett's were outrun by NASA. Who could have predicted back in 1943 that NASA would turn the swashbuckling Martian frontier over to bean-counters and bureaucrats? By the time Brackett wrote her last Erik John Stark novels in the 1970s, NASA had made the whole *idea* of Mars so boring that Stark had to retreat to a distant star system like Shane riding off into the sunset in search of open range.

And yet somehow Brackett survived....

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To read Bracket is to dig deep into science fictional bedrock. Want to know where *Dune* comes from? Or Bradbury's haunting canal cities? Or the noir heroes of Dick, Tiptree, and Gibson? Read Brackett. (Pulp factoid of the day: Dick's first published novel, the *Null-A*-influenced *Solar Lottery*, originally came out bound back-to-back with Brackett's *The Big Jump*.)

Brackett's cardinal virtue is the ability to forge sentences so clean and direct that the poetry, ambiguity, and sheer complexity of her stories seem to sneak up sideways on you. Her plots pinball between rip-roaring adventure, thorny ethical dilemmas, and glittering moments of pure technowow. Her characters are dramatic and boldly drawn, yet still conflicted enough to be believable. And her prose has a mythic clarity and luminosity reminscent of Le Guin's best work... though, of course, that's getting it backwards.

It's exhilarating reading. And for anyone who writes sf, it's more than a little daunting. You can't ignore that nervous inner voice that keeps wondering how stuff this good could possibly have gone out of print...and what that says about the future prospects of your own paltry scribblings.

So why has Brackett languished out of print while lesser writers prospered? I don't have a clue. And, at least in Brackett's case, I'm not sure I buy the all-too-obvious gender-based answer. So here is your mission, if you choose to accept it: read all the Brackett you can get your hands on, and if you think you can figure out why she's not a household name, drop me an email. Or, heck, just drop me an email to rave about how great she is. I expect the latter kind of email will vastly outnumber the former.

The best place to start for first-time Brackett readers is the Planet Stories back-to-back reissue of *The Secret of Sinharat* and *People of the Talisman*. It's cheap and portable — and best of all, it's Stark.

At the risk of being accused of creeping lowbrow-ism, I have to confess that I think the Stark stories are Brackett's best work. They may not be the most subtle stuff she ever wrote, but they're jaw-droppingly good. They're also a pivotal moment in sf history — and not just because Stark is arguably the genre's first black hero.* With Stark's first appearance in the Summer 1949

*Since someone will inevitably ask, I hereby declare my adherence to the school of Brackettology that believes she purposely made Stark's race ambiguous.

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issue of *Planet Stories*, Brackett found the perfect hero for her signature blend of hard-boiled prose and pulp action — a mix that would dominate sf for the rest of the century and beyond. From Dick and Tiptree to Delany and Gibson, so many giants of the genre have adopted Brackett's noir-inflected tone that it has become an almost invisible part of sf's stylistic bedrock. These days if it's not noir, it barely feels like sf at all. And maybe that's one of the stylistic ticks that will eventually make today's sf look dated....

Or maybe not. After all, achieving immortality is easy: you just have to be as good as Brackett.

A rare beast appeared in my mailbox last month: one of those books so astonishingly good that it made me run out and buy everything else its author ever wrote.

The Martian General's Daughter is Theodore Judson's third novel. Judson's prior work has sparked comparisons to Heinlein and Asimov — and here he turns Asimov's famous advice about "cribbin' from Gibbon" into an unnerving little gem of a book that explores the intersection between science fiction, history, and metahistory.

The story is familiar to anyone who's read the Augustan Histories or seen the film *Gladiator*. But Judson's retelling of the old tale is quietly riveting, and his image of a decaying post-galactic aristocracy lamenting the loss of email and central air conditioning is priceless.

I kept asking myself what Judson was after while I was reading this book. I even asked myself once or twice if it was actually sf. By the time I read the last page, I knew it was sf — and sf of the very highest quality. But as to what Judson's after? Well, that will take deeper minds than mine to conjure.

One of the book's villians — and this is a book with many villains — spends his days padding around the Imperial Palace in antique driving slippers so he can sneak up behind people and make casual chitchat about assassination. Judson's story will sneak up on you in much the same way. And if you're anything like me, you'll hear the whisper of antique driving slippers shuffling down the dusty corridors of your brain long after you've turned the last page.

Taken as a whole, this month's books remind me of a story my father-in-law tells about visiting

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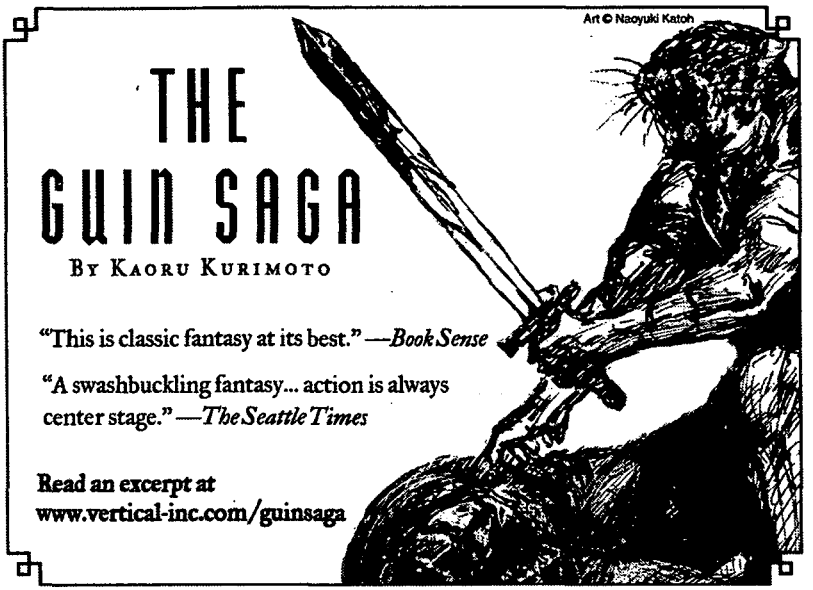
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THE
GUIN SAGA
By Kaoru Kurimoto
"This is classic fantasy at its best." —Book Sense
"A swashbuckling fantasy... action is always center stage." —The Seattle Times
Read an excerpt at
www.vertical-inc.com/guinsaga

Katz's Deli for the first time since the 1950s. The glorious, towering piles of corned beef that dominated his childhood memories of the famous Lower East Side sandwich joint were gone. When he asked why, the guy at the counter just shrugged and said, "Health Code."

Well, life certainly has gotten more hygienic since the pulp era. And it's hard to complain about hygiene. Or rigorous scientific speculation. Or second drafts, for that matter. But still...the old pulp had a rascally, fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants charm that sometimes seems to be missing from modern sf.

All of which leaves us readers with tough choices. Do we go for the decadent thrills of pulp? Or the more intellectual pleasures of hard science and elegantly honed sentences? Personally — at least when the books are this good — I'm happy to swing both ways.

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Although Charlie Finlay's story "The Political Officer" ran in our April 2002 issue, your editor has an indelible memory of reading it on 9/15/01, when the drama of workers enduring radiation burns took on extra poignancy in the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Towers. (If you want to read the story again to see that scene for yourself, you can find the story reprinted on our Website this month.)

No such cataclysmic event occurred during the week when your editor read this new story, but we think what befalls Max Nikomedes in this tale will also leave a lasting impression.

The Political Prisoner

By Charles Coleman Finlay

FOR EVERYONE'S CONVENIENCE, the execution grounds on Jesusalem stood next to the cemetery. The cemetery was the biggest public garden on the terraformed planet: families sacrificed part of their soil ration to plant perennials and blossoming evergreens, bits of garnish like little sprigs of parsley on a vast platter of rocks. The sight of the garden usually made Maxim Nikomedes feel welcome when he returned to the planet, even if he only glimpsed the flowers for a moment from the window of his limousine.

This return was different. An Adarean was scheduled for execution, and the mob that gathered to watch it blocked Max's view. And for this visit, Max was riding in an armored car for prisoners, not a limousine.

Max peered out the tinted window, but was met with his own reflection: he was a small man in his forties, with an acne-scarred face pale from years in the space service as a political officer. There were loose threads on his uniform where the rank had been torn off. He raised his hands to scratch his nose — the window flashed with the silver gleam of the handcuffs.

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He looked past himself.

The crowd, dressed in their drab Sabbath clothes, shoved and shouted, surging toward the execution altar. They were pushed back by the soldiers from Justice, spilling into the road and blocking the car. Atop the altar, the Minister of Executions poured baptismal water over the Adarean's bald green head. The crowd shook and roared in frenzy.

"You want to stay and watch them stretch the pig-man's neck?" the guard asked Max.

Max had been ignoring the guard seated opposite him. But now the seasoned political officer turned his head with a cold calm and lifted his handcuffed wrists, as if to say he had bigger worries. Soon enough, he might make an official visit to the execution altar. He would, at least, have a good view of the flowers in the graveyard.

Looking back out the window, he said, "What does it matter to me if an Adarean lives or dies?"

The guard craned his head around to talk to the driver.

"See, that's what I don't understand," he said, pointing the barrel of his gun out the window. "They're like aliens. Adareans gave up their souls when they quit being human, so what's the point in baptizing this pig-man?"

Max frowned while the guard and driver argued the merits of pre-execution conversion. *Pig-man*. It was odd how a man's work took on a life of its own. Max remembered creating that propaganda term years ago, during the war with Adares. The people on his planet thought they were God's Select, emigrating to a purer place where they could live a holy life. They fell into conflict with the emigrants to Adares, a population that claimed to be the next step, deliberate and scientific, in human evolution. To stir people up to fight a technologically superior foe, Max created the slogan *There is no evolution, only abomination*. Then he dug up some old Earth-history on using pig-valves in heart transplants — the first step toward godlessness, changing man into something other than God's own image. Max connected *that* to the genetically modified Adareans, who stole genes promiscuously from any species, and called them pig-men. It was adolescent name-calling, improvised in the service of a war long since over. Who cared if the Adareans' chlorophyll-laden skin and hair indicated more plant genes than pig? The religious population of Jesusalem, thinking swine unclean, embraced the insult.

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That was many years, and a different identity, ago. Max was vain enough to feel proud — and old enough to be ashamed. He loved his home, and had always served it any way he could.

Outside, the hangman fixed the steel cable around the Adarean's neck. Tradition called for hemp rope, but there was so little natural fiber on the planet, despite decades of terraforming, that everything but their clothes was made from metal or rock. The minister began preaching the repentance sermon while the powerfully built hangman forced the Adarean to kneel and bend his head. The crowd settled down to listen, and the driver nudged the car forward again.

Max continued to stare out the window. They hovered through dusty, unpaved streets, leaving a cloud of grit behind them, until they arrived at a big, concrete, open-ended U. The Department of Political Education building.

The guard hopped out, weapon at his side, and held open the door. "It must feel good to be back, huh?"

Max looked up to see if the guard really was that stupid. His simple, frank face bespoke genuine belief. Max scooted across the seat and lifted his handcuffed wrists for an answer.

The guard waved his hand vaguely. "Nobody believes that charge of treason!"

Max winced at the word. In the old days, even a suspicion of treason meant immediate death. He walked quickly as if to escape the charge, crossing the courtyard to the entrance. More guards, these blissfully silent in their charcoal-colored uniforms, opened the door. The lobby inside was an oasis of tan benches planted around a small blue pool of carpet.

A pale green Adarean leapt up from one of the seats and blocked Max's way. "Please," he said. "I must see Director Mallove while there's still time to stop the execution."

Depending on the length of the sermon — they could run for a few minutes or a few hours — it might already be too late. "Can't really help you," Max said, lifting his handcuffs in answer for a third time.

The guard steered Max around the Adarean. When the door to the stairwell creaked shut behind them, the guard grumbled, "Weedheads."

"I'll never get used to grass hair," Max said. He doubted the Adareans converted much solar energy from their hair, despite all their talk of developing "multiple calorie streams."

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His legs ached in the full gravity as he climbed the stairs. He'd visited planets with elevators before: the older he got, the more he believed in the possible holiness of technology. When he went to Earth, he visited a museum about the Amish, a group of people who stubbornly lived in the past while technology swept others past them. The tour guide thought he'd find the religious similarities interesting. Max had begun to have sympathy for the galactics who looked at his planet as an oddity just like the Amish.

Too bad his people had never been pacifists.

On the top floor, the guard ushered Max past the admin — owl-eyed Anatoly, whose expressionless gaze followed Max across the room — to the office of the Director of Political Education, Willem Mallove. Max's boss.

One of Max's bosses. But that was complicated, and involved his old identity. Max filed that away in "things too dangerous to think about right now."

Mallove sat posed, hand on chin, staring out the window. He had an actor's face, handsome and charismatic with just the right hint of imperfection — a small scar that forced his upper lip into a minor sneer. His face had gotten him into vids when he studied off-planet on Adares, years ago, before the revolution. Rumor had it that his insincerity — the Adareans were enormously sensitive to nuances of emotion — had driven him out of acting. The spacious office was decorated with fabric wall-coverings, some rare wooden chairs, and the famous stained-glass desk with its images of the Blessed Martyrs — a ministry heirloom from before the revolution.

"You may leave us, Vasily," Mallove told the earnest-but-stupid guard. His hand stayed posed on his chin.

"But, sir — "

"That will be all."

Great — whatever happened next, Mallove didn't want witnesses. The door clicked shut behind Max. He had an impulse to stand at parade rest, hands behind him — like all of the government bureaucracy, Education was part of the military — but the cuffs made that impossible.

"Sir, may I have these off?" Max lifted his bound wrists.

Mallove's chair creaked as he spun around. Instead of answering the

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question, he pulled open a drawer, removed a gun, and aimed it at Max's head.

"Someone in my Department is disloyal," Mallove said. "What I need to know, Max, is it you?"

Max stared past the barrel into Mallove's eyes. "Sir, if you want me to be disloyal, I will be."

If it was going to be theatrics, Max could play his role.

They stared at each other until Mallove, with exaggerated casualness, placed the gun, still charged, still aimed at Max, on the desk and leaned back in his chair. "A big change is coming, Max. Before it arrives, I have to root out every traitor — "

Cold fear prickled the back of Max's neck. "Is Drozhin dead?"

Mallove paused, frowning in irritation at the interruption. "I know we all think of General Drozhin as the man who eats knives just so he can shit on people to kill them. But even he is just another mortal man."

"That's why I asked. Is he dead?"

Mallove folded his hands together and looked away. "Not yet, not quite."

Max held his breath. Dmitri Drozhin was Max's other boss. Drozhin, the last great patriarch of the revolution, Director of the Department of Intelligence, in charge of the spies, the secret police, and the assassins. Max had been all three for Drozhin, including his deep undercover spy on Mallove. Max's last mission in space, aboard the spy ship *Gethsemane*, had gone badly when his orders from Drozhin conflicted with his orders from Mallove.

And now here he was a prisoner. Very likely, he had finally been caught as a double agent. Maybe Meredith, his wife, from long ago and that other identity, would use their soil ration to plant flowers for him in the cemetery.

"Too bad," he said to the news about Drozhin.

Mallove leaned forward, resting his hand on the gun. "What happened aboard the *Gethsemane*? To Lukinov, I mean."

The implication was that he knew something. *Answer right, or I'll still shoot you.* For once, Max didn't think Mallove was acting. What could he say safely? What did Mallove know and what did he only guess? Max jerked his hands apart — the metal cuffs dug into his wrists as the

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chain snapped taut. He was thinking about this wrong: if he wanted to survive, the question was not what did Mallove know, but what did he want to hear?

"It would seem," Max said, reciting the official version, "that Lukinov tried to sabotage the ship's nuclear reactor, that he ended up killing himself when he botched it."

Mallove sketched a whirligig in the air with his free hand, signifying his opinion of the official version. "Yes, but what *really* happened?"

What really happened was that Max caught Lukinov spying for Mallove. Max garrotted him and sabotaged the ship so he could return home to report to his secret boss. He paused for a second, trying to guess Mallove's fear. "I don't think Lukinov was selling us out to the Adareans, no matter what Intelligence says," he said. "More likely it had something to do with his gambling habit."

Mallove's scarred lip twitched — a tell.

The gambling habit. That was probably how Mallove blackmailed Lukinov into spying for him. Now Mallove was afraid of being caught.

Max decided to push his luck. "I witnessed Lukinov gambling with the captain," he said. "The sabotage was intended to cover up some secret, only it went wrong. I'm sure I was arrested on trumped-up charges in order to keep me from investigating the captain. If we find out who Lukinov had been gambling with at home before — "

Mallove interrupted. "That doesn't matter. So his body's still floating out there in space?"

"Yes. He was ejected during a hull breach in the radiation clean-up."

"Well, you can rest easy. I've insisted that we recover Lukinov's body. If anything's been hidden, we'll find it."

Like the ligature marks Max left on Lukinov's neck? That would wreck his story. "Excellent news," he said.

Metal runners squeaked as Mallove pulled open another stained glass drawer and retrieved a crystal bottle of vodka with two tumblers. He filled one and took a sip. "How long have you been with Political Education, Max?"

Longer than you, Max thought. He'd been there at Drozhin's side when the old man decided to form Political Education. Together, they created a new identity for Max when he joined it as a mole. "Since the beginning. It was my first posting when I joined the service."

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"Mine too." Mallove tapped his fingers on the glass. "The treason charges against you are laughable, Max. I'm sure Drozhin locked you up because he knows you're one of the key men in my Department."

Yes, why had Drozhin's department locked him up as soon as the ship landed? Disregarding the captain's official charges against him — Max was still trying to figure that one out. He'd gone from being the prisoner of one boss to the prisoner of another. What did the Bible say about serving two masters?

He rattled the links on his cuffs. "If the charges are so laughable, maybe we could take these off."

Again, Mallove ignored his request. "Let's speak frankly. Drozhin's old, he's sick, he's going to die soon. Maybe within days. Without him, Intelligence will be in complete disarray."

And the people he's protected, like me, Max thought, *we're all compost.*

Mallove picked up the gun. Max tensed, ready to take the bolt.

But Mallove didn't notice him flinch; he was too intent on swiveling his chair to point the gun out the window. "The fact is, Intelligence is done for once the old man dies. Drozhin never promoted anyone smart enough to replace him. So when he dies, there will be a battle for power."

There was more than some truth in that. "You think it'll be a physical battle?"

Mallove pretended to shoot people out the window, as if he wanted a physical battle. "There won't be soldiers in the streets," he said. "Those days are long behind us. Yes, men will be discredited, forced to leave their positions, and senior officers will go to prison. But if I surround myself with enough loyal men, all that power will be mine."

Which would be a disaster for the planet, and all their attempts to change it for the better. "You think there's a traitor within Education?"

"I'm sure of it, at least two." Mallove spun around, pointing the gun directly at Max.

This time Max didn't jump. Mallove paused a moment, then set the gun down. The metal clicked hard on a slab of colored glass depicting the assassination of Brother Porluck.

Mallove chuckled to himself. "'I'll be disloyal if you order me to, sir.' Now there's loyalty for you. Drozhin doesn't have anyone like that." He tapped the intercom. "Anatoly, bring in the key."

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Max released a sigh of relief. For the first time, he thought he might survive this interview.

The door swung open quietly. The admin entered and unlocked Max's cuffs. Anatoly was a competent, scholarly officer, the kind who plotted out military campaigns on spreadsheets instead of maps. His gaze lingered on the desk, on the gun backlit by bulbs behind the stained glass image of the fall of the Temple, and on Mallove's hand, which rested with deliberate casualness by the pistol's trigger.

Max rubbed his sore wrists, and wondered what part of this tableau was for him and what part was for Anatoly. With Mallove, there were always wheels inside of wheels.

"Anything else, sir?" Anatoly asked.

"There are some things still up in the air — kinda like clay pigeons." Mallove barked out a laugh at his own joke and pretended to shoot one. "Get reservations for three down at Pillars of Salt. The booth across from the door."

Anatoly said, "Yes, sir," and reached in his pocket for a phone.

Max's mouth watered at the prospect of dinner from Pillars of Salt. He had lamb medallions on a bed of saffron couscous the last time he was there, a few years ago, and hadn't eaten that well since. That had been with Meredith, to celebrate their wedding anniversary —

He shut down that line of thinking. He kept his life strictly compartmentalized, different parts of it sealed behind bulkheads. This was no time to weaken the seals.

Mallove capped the vodka and put it in a drawer, along with the weapon. Scene over, time to put the props away. The second glass, intended for Max, had been forgotten.

"I want you to help me find the traitor, Max," Mallove said. "Let's root out Drozhin's spies."

"I'm the man to do it," Max said, without a hint of irony. Maybe he could cast suspicion on Mallove's best men, and weaken Education in the process.

"Anatoly has already compiled a short list of suspects. The two of you together will find Drozhin's moles."

Max carefully avoided meeting the admin's gaze. "Are you sure Anatoly has time for this, with all his other duties?"

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"He'll make time," Mallove said. "This is the most important job I have and you're the two best men I've got."

That's what Max feared. Anatoly was smart, and Max didn't want to risk being caught by him. The admin stared at Max over the rim of his glasses, as if he were already trying to peer through his facade. He maintained eye contact the whole time he tapped out reservations and made a call to Mallove's driver to bring around a car. He looked like he wanted to say something; Max wondered what it was.

Anatoly's gaze flicked to Mallove. "They have the booth ready, sir." Then he held out his hand to Max. "It's good to have you back, Nick."

Max forced a grin. Nick was short for Nikomedes — Anatoly had always called him Old Nick, said he was as ugly as Satan and twice as mean. He clasped Anatoly's hand, hard. "It's damn good to be back, Annie."

He knew the admin hated the girly contraction of his name, but he grinned back. Max's first order of business would be getting Anatoly off this assignment.

They left the office together, boot soles echoing on concrete as they stomped down the main stairwell, which was plain and unpainted. The architecture was plain for a moral as well as a practical purpose. The settlers of Jesusalem had called themselves Plain Christians, twenty-first-century religious fundamentalists who feared the advances of science and considered all genetic engineering abominations. After all, if man was made in the form of God, any changes in that form amounted to a renunciation of the divine. They'd started in the old United States, in North America, but had found many of their converts later in Europe, especially the former Soviet republics.

Ironically, it was the technology the Plain Christians feared that allowed the survival of their religion. When biocomputers created the singular new intelligence that made space travel possible, they sank all their resources into a mass migration out to the first marginally habitable planet no one else wanted, a primitive place with surface water and just enough ocean-algae-cognate to produce breathable levels of oxygen. Everything beyond that was rock and sand and struggle, a desert for the devout. Publicly they claimed to keep their buildings austere and luxuryless as penance; the truth was that terraforming went slowly and poorly, and plain was all they could manage.

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When they exited the stairwell and crossed the main lobby, the Adarean rose from his bench and came toward them.

Max looked at him more closely this time. The Adarean was too tall, with joints and proportions that were off, inhuman even before you noticed the green color.

"Willem," the Adarean called out to Mallove, coming forward. Like they were old friends. Adareans hated hierarchies. "I've been waiting days to see you."

"Ah," Mallove said, his face momentarily blank as he thought about which script he was performing. Then he smiled, cold, frosty, as blinding as the sun on a comet. "How good to see you again, comrade Patience."

For a second, Max wondered if the *Patience* were a joke; the Adareans who came to Jesusalem sometimes named themselves for traits they admired, but *Patience*?

Mallove didn't offer his hand.

"I'm here to protest recent acts of violence against innocent Adareans and ask for a halt to today's execution, late though it may be," Patience told Mallove. He seemed very agitated, looking up as if he expected to hear other voices.

Mallove took the stern role now. "But you chose to come to Jesusalem, knowing the history between our planets and accepting the personal risks."

"*Between our planets*?" The Adarean's voice rose into that unsettling mid-range that could be either male or female. "What does that mean? Planets don't interact — individual people do. You know that we have nothing to do with the Adareans who came here before us. They were different people."

A group of Adareans had come before the revolution to join the Plain Christian church. When the old patriarchs were losing the war in the cities, a few radical Adareans showed them how to fashion nuclear weapons from the fissionable undecayed uranium-235 sometimes found in the young planet's surface. They'd nuked the revolutionary stronghold of New Nazareth, almost reversing the war.

The surviving leaders declared war on Adares, although they were in no position to prosecute it at the time. And the people, even those not originally for the revolution, had rallied in their hatred of the impure,

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genetically altered Adareans. The pig-men. The abomination. The Beast. It gave all the people of the planet a common enemy to hate besides each other. A rallying cry that saved the planet.

"Look," Max said. "What happened to your friend, it's nothing personal. It's just politics."

Mallove opened his hand with a dramatic flourish. "Exactly. It's politics. Perhaps you should go protest at the Department of Intelligence."

"I did!" Patience said. His hair bristled, moving like grass in the wind. "They said they couldn't do anything to stop the execution and told me that I needed Education."

"Well, there you have it," Mallove quipped. "Consider today's execution educational."

Mallove walked toward the door, Anatoly in his wake; guards blocked the Adarean to prevent him from following. Max sniffed something sour in the air — the briefing was that Adareans communicated with scent, but no one had any proof.

"I've been looking over your files while we were fighting to get you out of that prison cell," Mallove was saying as Max caught up.

"Trying to decide if I was worth the effort?" Max asked.

Mallove grinned. "You must be. Drozhin did everything in his power to keep us from knowing that he held you prisoner. Fortunately I have my own sources. Of all the senior officers I have, Max, you've spent the least amount of time at headquarters."

"Yes, sir," Max said. The guard opened the door. Hot air from the plaza washed over them.

"For over twenty years, you've gone from one field posting to the next," Mallove said. "Never a desk rotation. That's not typical at all."

He was asking for an explanation.

"It's been easier to keep fighting the revolution that way," Max said, knowing it was the right thing to say, but more than half-believing it. "To change the planet, we have to change one mind at a time, until everyone's transformed."

The cost of terraforming a primitive planet was too high; it required too much sacrifice. People had to be true believers in *something* to do it.

"That's been good so far, Max," Mallove said with an almost avuncular

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tolerance. "But we're moving the battlefield to another level now and we need a bigger vision."

Max made a mental note: Mallove repeated his earlier war metaphor — he wanted to be seen by history as a great general, even though he came to the revolution late, after the fighting was over.

Max scanned the courtyard and reminded himself that the fighting was over. The Department of Political Education sat on a peaceful street. Headquarters was, in fact, an old school building: the ostensible symbol was that Education was part of the people, right out in the neighborhood, not set off behind barricades like the secret police in Intelligence. Older, smaller buildings bunched up around it, with windowbox gardens and colorful banners hanging from the rooftops.

Their limousine pulled up to the curb.

Mallove's personal bodyguard opened the door. Mallove paused, lifted his head to the sky, and said, with a grin like a vid general's, "Into the battle!"

Which is when Max noticed the armed gunmen — soldiers for certain, special forces, but in street clothes, nondescript browns and grays — step out from the alleys and doorways. Education's goons always made extravagant gestures, eager to be seen and feared. These moved smoothly, almost gliding, with a distinct lack of threat that made Max's skin prickle.

He grabbed Anatoly's shoulder, out of reflex, one comrade to another, and hissed "Run!"

The first of the soldiers lifted his gun and shot Mallove's driver in the back of the head with a sound no louder than a muffled pop.

Max raised his hands above his head, turned away, dropped his chin toward his chest. *Look, I'm no danger, I don't see a thing.* He walked toward the nearest corner.

Another muffled pop, and a shout to "Get down! Get the hell down!" and Anatoly's voice, or maybe Mallove's, shouted his name. One of the gray men stepped out from the corner, gun aimed pointblank at his eye.

Guards burst out of Education's lobby at the same moment, firing wildly. Automatic gunfire, old-fashioned ballistics, blasted from the windows directly overhead.

The gray man lifted his eyes for a split second as the shots sounded above him. Max attacked, closing his hand over the barrel of the gun and

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turning it back into the man's chest, squeezing the trigger with his finger over the other man's. Volts shot through the body, dropped him twitching to the ground. Max's arm went numb to his elbow.

For the next few seconds everything dissolved in the chaos of crossfire and men diving for cover. With the gun still in his hand, Max emptied the man's pockets into his — a little cash, nothing more. He rounded the corner, ran to the next one, turned. Shopkeepers and residents were coming out into the street at the sounds of fighting.

So Mallove had been wrong. Intelligence did mean to have a battle in the streets. And Max had let himself get trapped on the wrong side of the front lines. He would have been safer in his original prison cell.

He dodged down another alley, buttons flying as he ripped off his telltale charcoal-colored uniform shirt. His plain T-shirt would draw less attention from snipers looking for the other color. Jamming the gun into his pants, he shoved his way into a group of old women with shopping bags full of bread and produce. He slouched, keeping his head down as he crossed the street in their midst.

"What — you didn't have time to get dressed when her husband came in?" one of the old ladies sneered.

I'm not happy to see you, Max wanted to say. *And that really is a gun in my pocket.* He broke away from them at the far curb.

An unmarked government car — but black, with tinted windows, same as being marked — blew down the street toward Education. Max flattened into a doorway to let it pass.

A block away, on the edge of a rougher neighborhood, he slipped into a small shop and bought a phonecard, probably an illegal phonecard since the clerk accepted cash. Max stood in a corner by the window and watched the street. As he punched in the private number to Drozhin's gatekeeper, the one he'd memorized and never used, he noticed scratch marks on his hand. He must've gotten them from the guard, when they struggled for the gun —

"What is it?" the voice on the other end said before the phone even rang.

"I need to speak to Uncle Wiggly," Max said. "Peter Rabbit's in troub — "

"Sorry, you have a wrong number."

He was disconnected.

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Just like he had been in Drozhin's prison.

A thought hit Max with all the power of a sniper's shot: what if Drozhin had *already* died? The mean old son of a bitch had to go sometime and, like everything else he did, he would probably do it in secret.

Max was screwed if that was the case. Who would take over Intelligence? Hubert was the nominal second in command, but he had no real power. Kostigan was the one to watch out for, but Drozhin probably had standing orders to have him assassinated on his own death. He wouldn't trust that one without a thumb on him. The only one who knew Max personally was Obermeyer. He'd been Max's case officer for years and reported directly to Drozhin. He was also certainly the one assigned to assassinate Kostigan, and it was unlikely he would live out the day after that.

So if Drozhin was dead, and Mallove had just been assassinated, which seemed to be the case, Max was unlikely to live out the day either. Anyone who didn't kill him on purpose would do it by accident.

The clerk stared at him, at the bloody back of his hand, the half-uniform. Pictures of the coup were being broadcast on the screen. If the media was involved already, then the whole thing had been staged. So, yeah, he was screwed.

Max yanked a phonecard from the rack, shoved it at the clerk, tossed money at the counter. "Activate it."

The clerk shook his head, pushed the money back.

The gun came out of Max's pocket and the barrel came to rest on the clerk's temple: Max nodded at the wedding ring on the man's hand. "I'm going to use this to call my wife, tell her she's in trouble. You let me do that, and then I'm gone."

Keeping one eye on Max, the clerk rang up the sale and activated the phone.

It rang and rang until her voicemail clicked on. "This is the house of," she used Max's other name, his original one. Her voice was a bit rough — she joked it was from yelling at their children, but it was too many years spent outside in the planet's harsh landscape, breathing grit. "He's unable to speak to you right now, but leave a message and we'll call back."

He hesitated. "Honey, it's me. I'm in the capital, but may be traveling soon. Don't know when I'll be back — "

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Footsoldiers, dressed in the tan uniforms of Intelligence infantry, ran by the window. Max faded back behind the rack of apple chips.

" —I, I," he couldn't bring himself to say *love*, so he switched to their private code, "wish I was with you at the beach. Take care of yourself."

He clicked off and looked up to see the clerk pointing the barrel of a shockprod at him.

Max let the phonecard slip from his hand. It clattered on the floor. For the second time in less than a half hour, he put his hands up in visible surrender, backing quickly toward the door.

He shoved the gun in his pocket and hit the street running blind. The street was oddly quiet now except for shouts from one alley. Max turned the opposite way, sprinted down a residential street and over a wall into somebody's garden, running through backyards and past astonished faces until he came to a corner lot occupied by one of the old Plain Churches, a long, low building that could have been a bunker if you bricked in the windows.

The revolutionaries had not eliminated the churches when they took over the government. Pastors who supported the new regime prospered; some churches, like this one, the Falter Sanctuary, found other uses as dropboxes where Drozhin's spies passed information to Intelligence.

Max entered, circling the pews to reach the Holy Spirit Stations in the side chapel. Whispering a prayer, he opened the thumb-worn, ancient Bible at random, more for the sake of ritual than insight.

He closed his eyes, stabbed his finger at a page, and opened them again. Deuteronomy 14.2: You are a people holy to the LORD your God, and he has chosen you out of all peoples on Earth to be his special possession.

And what exactly did that mean when they were no longer on Earth? Theology had never been Max's strong point, so he didn't worry about it. He snatched up a slip of prayer paper and a pencil stub, then walked to the kneeling wall. He chose the spot farthest from the two women, probably mother and daughter, heads covered in similar red scarves, who were earnestly and quietly scratching out their prayer requests. The television screen in the corner cycled through the old videos of Renee Golden, the Golden Prophet, founder of the Plain Christians.

"*God's plan for us can be seen in the tests he sends us,*" the Golden Prophet said.

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Max recognized the sermon, the one she made on the banks of the river in Rostov-on-Don, in southern Russia. Golden was American, but she proselytized heavily during two long missions to the old Soviet republics, returning through Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece. Hundreds of thousands followed her call to go into space. When she died before making the journey herself, it only made her more like Moses, destined never to reach the Holy Land. Her followers formed a polyglot community that never came together except by force — the force of her personality in the beginning, the force of hardship during the settlement of Jesusalem, and then, finally, under the Patriarchs and the revolution, the force of force.

Max hadn't used this church dropbox in over a decade. He folded his hands and said an earnest prayer to the god of spies and all men caught behind enemy lines that there was still someone out there to receive it.

Picking up his pencil, he began to write. He hoped that whoever saw the old code recognized it.

" — Those of you who are listening to me now by way of satellite, I want you to join hands with us. Reach out and put your hand on the television screen — "

He wrote slowly. The old code was all language for family. Aunt meant one thing, uncle meant another, with trigger words that keyed off the meanings.

" — God has given us the design for a ship the same way He gave Noah the blueprints for the ark. Only now we are invited to ascend directly into heaven. Bring your prayers with you, into heaven, and hand-deliver them to God — "

Max folded the paper and dropped it in the slot.

"May I help you?"

A young pastor stood there in his ceremonial suit and tie. One of the angry young pastors, bent on reclaiming the church's glory in the face of the secular regime, if Max guessed correctly.

" — God tells us not to mix with sinners, but this fallen world is full of sinners. Our only choice is to leave this world behind, to ascend — "

"Just making a prayer request," Max replied softly. He dropped the pencil stub into the little cup.

"I don't recognize you as a regular communicant."

"The church is a sanctuary for all," Max said.

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The pastor glanced at Max's state of half undress, his sweat, his bloody hand. "It's funny how those who persecute the church run to it when it suits their needs."

" — *Are you ready for the test? You have a choice to make: you can die with the sinners or turn your face toward heaven and join the angels* — "

The old woman at the other end of the pew grunted as she rose to her feet with the help of her daughter. "Anyone can change," she chided the pastor. "Sometimes crisis is God's way of showing us the need to repent."

"Yes, Mrs. Yevenko," the pastor said.

Max slipped away when the pastor spoke to her. There was nothing else to do here except hope that Obermeyer, or whoever, got his message and understood it. He pushed open the side door; the sun over the metal rooftops glared blindingly, and he blinked.

The hard muzzle of a gun pressed against his neck. "I'll be happy to kill you," a voice said. "Just give me an excuse."

Max raised his hands in the air, for the third time today, this time in true surrender. "No need for that."

The muzzle shoved hard against his head, knocking him off-balance. "I'll decide what is and isn't needed." He reached into Max's pocket and retrieved the gun. "Now walk toward Calvary Park."

"Yes, sir," Max said. These men were on his side, he had to remember that: they all served Intelligence, they all served Jesusalem. He'd tell them who he was right now, except for the possibility that Kostigan was in charge.

He walked at a non-provocative pace, neither too slow nor too fast. Close to the square, he saw other men being rounded up. No, not just men: there was a woman carrying a baby, tugging a cap down over its head. A little boy clutched the hem of her skirt, running to keep up. This district housed the employees and families of those who worked for the Department of Education. So they were all being rounded up, even the civilians. A clean sweep.

Two other men marched along under the gun of another soldier. One of them was in a T-shirt, like Max, with a cross on the same chain as his dogtags. The other was a major from Education.

"Can you take this one for me?" shouted Max's keeper.

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The other soldier nodded yes, used his weapon to wave all three men up against a flat concrete wall. "Go stand over there — now!"

Perfect wall for an execution, Max thought as he stood against it. Lots of room for burn marks and bloodstains to impress and cow the public for years to come. Jesusalem was full of walls like that, but most of them were old.

While the soldier talked into his link, the other two prisoners whispered. The one with the cross said, "Hey, it's me. Hey."

The voice startled Max. The stupid-but-earnest guard — what was his name? "Vasily?"

"Yeah, what a mess. What's going on?"

The major had different plans. "If we run three different directions, he can't get us all."

Vasily brushed his thumb nervously against his cross. "Yeah, but what about the one he does get?"

"Look," Max whispered, covering his mouth with his hand like he was scratching his nose. "The guard's just pretending to talk. He's watching, waiting for us to run."

Probably hoping for them to run. That way he could just shoot them and walk away. He might do it anyway, Max thought, even without provocation.

"I'll go left first, draw his attention," the major whispered. "You two take off the other way."

It didn't matter to Max if the guy got himself killed, but he didn't want to get caught in the crossfire. When the major leaned, ready to spring away, Max slammed him into the wall. "Don't do it!"

"Your mother's a pig!"

"Move again and I'll shoot all of you!" the guard yelled, running over with his weapon up.

Max looked him in the eye, held up his hands in what was turning into a habitual gesture. "Hey, I'm on your side — "

"Shut up!"

The guard hesitated. He wasn't used to killing yet, wasn't even used to hurting people. Maybe Drozhin recognized that problem with this generation of troops and was trying to blood them. That was possible too, if Drozhin was still alive. That was something Drozhin would do. Any

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explanation was possible at this point: it was making Max crazy. All he needed to do was hold on until he could make his contact and get away.

The guard listened to something in his ear bud, gestured with the gun. "That way. The transports are lined up in Calvary Park."

"Transports?" the major asked. "Where are we — "

The butt of the rifle interrupted his sentence, scattering his words, along with his blood, over the road ahead of him as he sprawled.

"Did I give you permission to talk?" The guard, pulse jumping in his neck, hopped out of arm's reach and jabbed his gun at them again. "Get up."

Max tensed. The guard was working himself up to kill. It was clear three prisoners made him nervous. He felt outnumbered, unsure.

The major tried to push himself up, but his elbow buckled and he fell again. The guard jabbed his gun, pointing it at all of them in turn, "I said, get up."

Vasily shouted, "Get up!"

Max hooked his hand under the major's elbow and yanked him to his feet, grunting with the effort. He was thinking he could throw the major into the guard and then run —

Wheels squealed around the corner and a military recruit van commandeered for tonight's mission braked to a stop just feet away from Max. Two soldiers hopped out and the moment to run had passed. The major tore his arm away from Max, staggered to his feet. He'd never been blooded either, which is why he thought he could run.

"What the *fuck* is going on?" one of the new soldiers said. They all looked like children to Max, although they were older than he'd been during the revolution.

"I'm just following orders," Max's guard answered.

"Well the whole thing is *fucked*," the newcomer said. "What the *fuck* do we do with these *fuckers*?"

"Take them down to Calvary Park with the others."

"God *fucking* damn it all. Jesus Golden."

Guns jammed in their backs, the three men climbed into the back of the van. The new soldier grabbed the major. "I just fucking cleaned this, so don't bleed all over the seat."

"I am still your superior officer — "

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His protest was cut short by the goose-pimpling electricity, the smell of ozone and singed flesh. The major clapped a hand to his burned shoulder but he didn't cry out.

"Any other questions, traitor?" the new soldier asked. "No? Good." He shoved the major in, slammed the door shut.

Well, they were all being blooded.

The only other occupant in the van wore civilian clothes. He was leaning forward, saying, "Was that a gun? What just happened?"

Vasily swallowed hard, lifted the cross to his lips, kissed it, and the major stared straight ahead, his wide mouth tight, grim. Max didn't say anything either as the van rumbled away. They all leaned as the van sped around a corner. Max's stomach, still empty, lurched with it.

"Why is this happening?" Vasily asked. "We're all on the same side. I don't understand."

"I heard they assassinated Mallove," the major said, quietly. "Shot to the head."

Max wondered if the comment was an observation or if it was bait. He glanced at the floor, glanced out the window. "No, they didn't. I was there when it happened."

All their attention focused on him now, including the soldier on the other side of the cage up front.

"Mallove and his assistant, Anatoly," Max said, "and some other senior officer were on their way out. There were shots fired by the soldiers, but only after all three were shoved into a car and taken away."

The major stared at Max; so did the guard up front.

"What do you think it means?" the civilian asked.

"It means Drozhin's probably dead," the major said. "It means Kostigan has taken over Intelligence finally. And if they shoved all three guys in a car, it means they're dead as soon as the interrogations are done."

The civilian laughed nervously. "Drozhin's not dead. He's got more lives than Lazarus. I don't think he's ever going to die."

"All of you, just shut up," the soldier said as the van pulled to a stop. He and the driver got out.

"They'll be satisfied with killing all the generals and half the majors," the major said, with a rueful glance at his own insignia. "Most of the rest

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of you can expect some interrogation, some time in a cell, then reassignment. It won't be too bad."

When the civilian, probably a contractor of some sort caught in the Education buildings, spoke, his voice rose sharply. "They're taking us down to the cells? They told me it was an emergency evacuation."

"Don't worry, they don't have enough cells for all of us," Max said. The major stared at him hard, again, as if trying to figure out who he was.

"See, that's what I don't understand," Vasily asked. "Why are we doing this to each other? We've got a planet to finish terraforming. Hell, there's a whole galaxy to explore."

That was the real question, wasn't it? After three generations of terraforming, the planet was still hardscrabble at best. Like people, it was deeply resistant to change.

The civilian jabbed a finger at him. "How can you talk about terraforming — "

A fist hammered on the side of the van. "Shut the *fuck* up in there."

They fell quiet. Max folded his hands on his lap, leaned back, savoring the smell of antiseptic cleaners mixed with sweat. These other guys were on their own. All he had to do was avoid anything stupid now, get into the system and stay alive until some of the Intelligence people noticed him and pulled him out. He had to believe that would happen.

The major hooked his tongue into his cheek, then spat blood on the floor.

"Hey," Vasily hissed. "Don't do that. The guard said not to do that."

The major scuffed at the blood with the sole of his shoe, smearing the red stain everywhere. He was swirling his tongue for another spit when the back door swung open.

"Get out," the guard said, using his gun to herd them into a large crowd of men milling around in a hastily erected enclosure in Calvary Park. The gate clicked shut behind them. Nervous guards from Intelligence and the regular services patrolled around the outside of the chainlink fence.

Max circled the perimeter once, estimated about a hundred and thirty prisoners, most of them low-level Education bureaucrats or headquarters staff like Vasily. All men, which meant the families were being taken somewhere else. He tried to count the guards, but the numbers kept

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changing as men came and went. No familiar faces either, but then only Drozhin and Obermeyer would know him. He asked questions, trying to find out what people knew, but all he learned was that you could ask a question at one end of the crowd and hear it repeated as a statement of fact at the other end a few minutes later.

On the second pass around, someone clutched his arm.

"You!" The civilian from the van, still smelling like cologne and breath mints. "You're the one who saw Mallove get away free. Do you think he's negotiating for our release? What's going on?"

Max stared at him until he let go. "I think Mallove is doing everything in his power right now."

Let him interpret that as he might. Max walked away, the civilian trailing after, toward a noise at the gate.

A bald colonel in the sand-colored uniform of the regular services, backed by a small knot of similarly dressed soldiers and a flock of medtechs in green scrub coats, appeared at the fence. He kicked the chainlink at the main gate until the crowd all looked that way. He lifted a bullhorn to his mouth. "We know some of you were injured during today's unfortunate safety evacuation — "

"It's unfortunate more of you weren't hurt," someone shouted. Max moved away from the voice. All he wanted to do was stay clear of trouble; screw everyone else.

" — so you're all going to get a quick medical inspection for your own records, to make sure everything's fine, before we process you out of here. Be quick about it, cooperate fully, and everything will be fine. Line up, single file, at the gate. Stee-rip!"

The command echoed those the younger soldiers would have heard recently at basic training camp, and it settled down those men, including Vasily, who pushed his way to the front of the line, eager to comply. Max fell into line a little back of the middle, giving him time to hide how much he was unnerved. There was no reason to strip for a medical inspection, but getting men to obey seemingly reasonable authority was the first step to making them obey wrongful authority. If anyone knew that, a political officer did.

While the men ahead of him joked with the guards and fished for information about their release, Max removed his clothes and folded them, shoes on top.

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A scuffle sounded at the very front of the line. "Hey, I don't have any injuries in there!"

"Get used to it," cracked a voice behind him. "You know Intelligence has always been a pain in our ass."

Laughter rippled through the line as they shuffled forward one spot. Max stilled his face to boredom. If Education's best men joked like sheep under these circumstances, either they didn't know their history or they were idiots. Or both.

When his turn in line came, he handed over his articles and was directed behind a small temporary screen. One guard held a gun on him, another held a bigger weapon on the line behind him, and a third man scanned his clothes then tore off all the pockets and ripped open the seams and hems looking for hidden pockets. He had none in this pair, which he'd been issued in prison. A fourth man in medtech green ran a quick scan over his skin for subdermal implants and weapons.

"Bend over," the medtech said. "Nothing personal, just doing my job."

Max grunted. For a quick body cavity search, it was done as professionally and efficiently as a prostate exam.

"Next," the medtech said.

Max's clothes were handed back, more rags than not. The guard dropped the pockets and belt loops on a folding table with other confiscated items. Dressing again was a challenge, as thin as Max was — the drawstring had been torn off his underwear, so his briefs drooped, and without a belt, his pants sagged around his hips.

An explosive battering jerked Max's head around. In the garden by the playground, across from the enclosure, a jackhammer-truck dug a trench. While Max tried to figure out what it was doing, a shoving match erupted by the medtechs.

"Bend over!"

"Bend over yourself!"

The remaining guards rushed over, slammed the protesting man to the ground, and punched or threatened anyone else in line who looked likely to argue. Max held his pants up at the waist and went to the table with the confiscated items. He skipped over a pocketknife and a razor-cutter to grab two frutein bars, the only food he saw. He ripped one open

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and smashed it into his mouth, then rolled the other into the fold of his pants where he was holding them up.

"You! Move on!" Max stopped chewing, nodded his compliance to the guard, and walked past the objector, now pinned to the ground by three men. Without shoelaces, Max's shoes kept slipping off.

The inspected prisoners mobbed together near the fence, most of them, like Max, holding up their pants. They were subdued, angry, frightened: their attention was focused on the excavation machine beside the garden, where it jackhammered a large pit in the bedrock beneath the thin layer of soil. The grass had been carefully cut back in strips and moved to the side first, so it could be replaced.

"Would make a nice grave," someone said.

"Not so nice," said someone else, but Vasily was there, shaking his head, saying, "It's probably for latrines."

"Moron," someone else shouted. "Why not truck in compost booths?"

"Maybe they don't have enough," Vasily said.

His innocence and capacity for rationalization was almost charming. Max avoided him. The officer with the bullhorn outside the fence waved the workmen to stop and climbed down into the hole. His bald head and shoulders stuck out of the top. He shouted orders, indicated a certain depth, climbed back out.

Most of the men began to say that it was a grave, but the hole wasn't big enough for dozens of men. Max jostled his way into the middle of the mob for camouflage.

"Ow, watch my foot," someone next to him said.

"Sorry."

"You're lucky all they took were your shoelaces," the man said. "They took my boots. It's like we're all on suicide watch."

"Worst case of suicide I ever saw," Max said. "A hundred men shot themselves in the back, then filled in their own grave."

A few men chuckled. Outside the fence, a van pulled up — Max thought it might have been the same one they'd been transported in, with the bloody floor in back. It drove slowly over the mounds of colored stone until it reached the pit, where it unloaded a half dozen Adareans. One of them was Patience, who'd been waiting outside Mallove's office earlier in the day. Seemed like years ago.

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The jackhammer continued its work, sending up spectral clouds of dust in the twilight. A backhoe crowded up against the other side of the pit, scooping out buckets of broken rock whenever the jackhammer paused. While the Adareans milled around, their greenish skin looking sickly and pale, the last of Max's fellow prisoners finished his "health" inspection and crowded up against the fence. Cold, clammy skin pressed against Max as they tried to see what was happening outside.

"Weedheads!" one of the prisoners yelled.

"Go home, pig-men!" another shouted.

"Abomination!"

Within seconds, all their anger and fear and venom was directed at the Adareans. The chainlink rattled in rising pitch with their voices.

Outside, the Adareans clustered together. Even this far away, Max thought he could smell something sour waft from them. If the soldiers opened the gates and shoved the six into the compound right now, there'd be a massacre.

Instead the officer with the bullhorn stomped over to the Adareans, barking sharp orders, telling them to stand in the pit. When they hesitated, he waved his hands and guards rushed forward, shoving them down.

Tall as they were, the Adareans' heads showed above the rim of the pit. "It's not deep enough!" shouted one of the hecklers.

"Shoot them and they'll fit," shouted another and laughter rippled through the crowd. Max remained an island of silence.

Soldiers with shovels appeared around the hole and began spading the jackhammer gravel into it as quickly as they could. The Adareans shouted and struggled, but other guards kept them in place. Soon the weight of the stone pinned them where they were, until all that stuck above the surface was their bleeding, dusty heads.

The island of silence spread on Max's side of the fence, broken only by someone's half-suppressed laughter.

"They going to leave them there?" someone whispered.

No, Max thought, no, they weren't.

The scene was another tableau, like the one in Mallove's office. It reminded him of what they'd done, as guerrillas, with the Adareans they caught during the revolution. But he wasn't sure whether this was a sign that Drozhin was still alive and reviving old tactics, or that Kostigan had taken over and was reinventing them.

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The men with shovels tamped the lumpy gravel down smooth around their Adareans. The long grassy hair on their skulls was coated with a layer of dust. One of the Adareans alternated between weeping and panting. A couple others lolled unconscious.

"Are they trying to plant them to see if they'll grow?" one of the young men asked.

"What the hell are they doing?"

Teaching us a lesson, Max thought. Education.

The work crew stepped out of the way while someone went to the equipment shed and liberated the mower.

Max turned away and left the crowd. He leaned on the far fence, head sagging, as the mower made its charge across the small park. As the first shrill scream sounded, he squeezed his eyes shut, and he kept them shut as the grinding sound of the blades whirred down to bare gravel.

A few prisoners cheered the executions; others laughed nervously, trying to get the rest of the crowd to join them. One man retched. Most fell silent, and several drifted back toward Max.

The colonel with the bullhorn walked back over to the enclosure. "Listen up," he shouted. "You're all enemies of Jesusalem. You know in your heart what your crimes are, so we don't need to tell you."

He would have been a good political officer, Max thought.

"Unlike these off-worlder animals," the voice from the bullhorn continued, "we believe that you can repent of your evil choices" — interesting, Max thought, that their secular government used the same language as the religious one that preceded it — "and return to being productive citizens. We know that you were all misled by the criminal Mallove. Reject him and you'll be accepted back into society."

A surge toward the fence came from men ready to admit to, confess to, anything, for immediate release.

"I'm innocent," the civilian contractor was yelling as he shoved his way to the gate. "I don't even know Mallove."

Bullhorn gave an order. Guards cracked the gate while the sizzle of shock rifles kept the prisoners at bay; one guard yanked the civilian out of the compound before locking the gate again. The whole mob protested and yelled that they too were innocent. Bullhorn pulled out a handgun, placed it against the citizen's forehead, and shot him. His

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body collapsed to the ground. A shiver went through the mob around Max.

"We know all of you are guilty," Bullhorn shouted, "You will now have to redeem yourself through penance."

Yes, Max thought, a terrific political officer.

A large articulated bus, hastily armored with bars outside the windows, rumbled up to the gate.

"This is your ride," Bullhorn said. "Next stop, fabulous seaside beach resorts. Bring your swimsuits, towels, and tiny shovels. All aboard!"

The guards with shockguns opened the gate and herded the prisoners into the bus. They shuffled past the civilian's body, sprawled facedown on the rock. Professionally, Max admired that detail — it worked on so many levels: it showed the men that if civilians weren't safe, neither were they. And if Adareans could be killed, and if civilians could be killed, it made the prisoners identify more with the men with guns.

He stepped onto the bus, noting that it was one of the charter buses that mothers used to visit their children who'd moved to the new cities close to the coast. Another nice detail. Very reassuring.

Max shouldered his way back to the other door, then to the sliding door that connected the front compartment to the back, and found both locked. Not so reassuring.

The bus had three sections — a separate cab where the driver was safe from the passengers, important for this ride, followed by two individual sections, each with forty-eight seats. They'd be shoving sixty to seventy men in each.

Someone bumped into him, then someone else bumped them both. Bodies pressed close, the cumulative odor of sweat and bad breath and stale lunch was almost overwhelming. Guards yelled, "Get in, get back from the door!" as they physically packed the last few men on board. It felt like a grotesque game of musical chairs, with cursing for music and metal benches for chairs. The door snapped shut, stayed shut even as men pushed back. Through the window, Max saw guards herd more men into the second compartment.

A hand snaked through the bodies and grabbed hold of Max. Max twisted, tried to tug free, but it only had the effect of reeling the man to him.

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"Hey, it's me, Vasily."

"I don't really need a guard anymore," Max said.

"The front doors are locked."

"And the back doors and the compartment door."

"What are we going to do?" Vasily said. "You're a senior political officer — "

"Sh, sh, sh," Max said, squeezing a hand up in Vasily's face to make him shut up.

"Nikomedes — that's it!" a voice said from the bench beside them. The major from the van. His cheek was bruised, his lip swollen, where he'd been hit in the face. "I knew I knew you."

"I'm sorry," Max said.

"Major Benjamin Georgiev," the man said, squeezing over on the bench, making room for Max. "I served aboard the *Jericho* with you, years ago."

"You were the radio tech," Max said, sitting, recalling the name once it was matched to the ship. Another chance to keep a low profile, remain invisible, slipped away. The bus lurched into motion, throwing everyone off-balance, raising a chorus of curses. "I thought you were regular service."

"Transferred. Got inspired by the spirit of the revolution to join Education." Georgiev's eyes surveyed the bus. "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

"You two," Vasily interrupted. "You know how to get out of this, right?"

Georgiev ignored Vasily. "Killing those Adareans, that was a mistake," he said to Max. "That'll bring down the power of Adares, first with political pressure, then with force."

"Maybe," Max answered. "But Intelligence can get away with killing Adareans during the first throes of the purge. They'll blame it on runaway elements, punish some token low-level grunts, execute someone prominent, then appease the Adareans later."

"I doubt it'll stop there — it never does. Did you ever hear the one about the secret police?" Georgiev asked.

"Probably," Max said.

Vasily asked, "Which one?"

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Georgiev lifted his head toward Vasily. "The secret police came for the Adareans and no one tried to stop them, so they took the Adareans away."

Max recognized the old chestnut; Vasily said, "Yeah?"

"Then the secret police came for the unchristians and no one tried to stop them, so all the uns were taken away. Then the secret police came for the sinners — the fornicaters, the secret body polluters, the users of forbidden technology — and no one tried to stop them."

"So they took the sinners away," Vasily finished.

"Right," Georgiev said. "Finally the secret police came for honest men like you and me."

Max finished the joke. "And there was no one left to stop them."

"No," Georgiev said. "When they came for me, I said, 'Welcome, brother. Isn't it good to be the secret police?'"

After a pause, Vasily chuckled. The bus braked hard, throwing them back in their seats, then sped up again.

A young man with a soft chin leaned in from the bench beside them. "I heard you guys talking. You know, that guy they shot at the gate — "

"The accountant?" Georgiev asked. "He told me he was an accountant."

"No he wasn't, that's what I'm saying." He jerked his thumb down the aisle. "Guy back there says he recognized him as an actor. It was all staged. Guy got up and walked away while we were getting on the bus."

"Not walked," interrupted another kid hanging from an overhead rack. "There were two guys, one on either side of him, helping him, made it look like they were dragging him, but you could tell he was faking it."

"See, they're just trying to scare us," the first kid said. He laughed, like he wasn't fooled.

"Well, it's working," Vasily said, rubbing his throat, where his cross would've been. "I'm scared."

"The Adareans, that was fake too," Max said. "Really great bunch of actors."

The kid sitting down, the one with the soft chin, looked away and didn't say anything. But the one hanging from the strap said, "Yeah, the whole thing is a big scam. I hear Mallove and Drozhin worked it out together, plan to combine the two departments. Mallove's going to take over as soon as Drozhin's dead."

The pitch of conversation rose around them, a dozen variations of the

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same stories being told, repeated, and invented. Their small group sat quietly for a second.

Max coughed. "Did you ever hear the one that goes, how can you tell when a rumor about Drozhin is true?"

Major Georgiev stared at Max, his face carefully blank. The two kids waited for the answer. Finally, Vasily said, "How?"

Max aimed his finger like a gun at the other man's head. "'What did you just say?'"

Georgiev smirked and the kids chuckled nervously. Max leaned back, closed his eyes, ignored the press of bodies. His day had started as a prisoner, waiting to hear from his contact in Intelligence. His day ended as a prisoner, waiting to hear from his contacts in Intelligence. Nothing had changed. But then he thought about the distance from the Adarean baptism at the execution that morning to the brutal murder of the Adareans in the park, and it felt as if everything had changed.

As he listened to the sound of the wheels, all he could think of was the roar of the mower bladers as the tractor rolled toward the Adareans trapped in the pit.

"WAKE UP, NIKOMEDES." A hand shook him.

Before he was completely awake, Max deflected the hand and turned the wrist. He snapped alert quick enough to stop before he broke it. Major Georgiev bent over him. "What?"

"We're passing through the outskirts of Lost Angeles — it's night, the city's big enough to hide most of us."

"What's the plan? There are bars welded on the windows, and the doors are locked." He'd watched younger men waste themselves for hours trying to find a way out, everything from tearing through the panels to breaking windows. One of them had been cut badly on broken glass. Wind whistled through the broken windows; combined with the night temperatures, it would have chilled the ride to the point of hypothermia if not for the warmth of the bodies jammed together.

"We're going to rock the bus, tip it over," Georgiev said. "I could use your help organizing these kids."

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Max straightened in his seat. "Tipping the bus — that will get us out how?"

"They'll have to empty the bus then. We'll overpower them, make a break for it."

"You're on your own." He leaned back again.

"To think that I was ever inspired by you," Georgiev sneered. "You're a coward."

And you're a fool, Max wanted to respond. He had nothing against escape, but suicide? "Don't play into their hands."

"This morning," Georgiev said, looking around, "we were all part of an organization, each of us knowing our role and function. Tonight we are starving, thirsty outcasts, deprived of basic necessities. But we're still men, we have to do something."

There were murmurs of "amen" and "witness" from the men around them.

"Don't you think Intelligence's purpose is to reduce and dispirit us?" Max asked.

"Yes, but — "

"So what do you think they'll do to anyone who goes against their intentions early on?" Max asked. "What would your response be? To anyone who tries to lead?"

Georgiev said nothing.

"You would destroy the ring leaders as an example," Max said, answering his own question. "And first you would create a situation where you expect people to step up, just so you can make examples of them. It's what I would do."

"I'm not you," Georgiev said. "And I believe this is all a mistake. Those are our fellow soldiers out there, our brothers and cousins. If we force them to pay attention to us, they'll listen. And if they don't, we'll overwhelm them."

Murmurs of "yeah" and "they have to listen."

"You've been hit in the face and burned and you still say that?" Max said, leaning back in his seat. "We save ourselves. No purge lasts forever."

"You're pathetic," Georgiev said and turned away.

Vasily, hand at the invisible cross at his throat, stared at Max, shook his head, and followed Georgiev.

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Georgiev had no trouble organizing the men: he was the senior officer on board and soldiers were trained to love a hierarchy, taught to do something instead of nothing. After explaining his plan to tip the bus, he said, "All right, on the count of three, we all throw ourselves to starboard. Is that clear? One! Two!"

"Wait, wait, wait," cried one voice, and then others said, "Stop," and Georgiev yelled, "Wait, stop!"

The compartment was dark, but lights outside rolled front to back, front to back, illuminating puzzled faces. Finally, someone said, "Which side's starboard?"

Max smirked. Most of the men had only served groundside.

Georgiev rattled the locked door. "The doors are port, the other side is starboard. We want to tip over to starboard, so we can climb out the doors on top."

Murmurs of "got it" and "all right" were followed by Georgiev resuming the count. Max braced his feet on the floor and grabbed hold of the bench.

On *three* the mob of men surged toward the starboard side. The bus rocked — about as much as it did when it hit a bad pothole.

"That was pretty effective," Max said, but Georgiev was shouting out encouragement and instructions: "All right, that was a good first try. Let's all squeeze over to port, to the door side, and do it again."

Men crushed Max against the side. He smelled urine mixed in with all the other locker-room odors.

"Three!"

This time the men yelled as they surged to the other side.

This time there was a noticeable rock.

"Good work, men," Georgiev shouted. "Now we're going to rock it back and forth. As soon as we hit port side, the door side over here" — he leaned over and banged the door — "I want you all to run back to starboard, over here. Got it?"

Mumbles of "got it" and "yes, sir."

"What? I can't hear you!"

"YES, SIR!"

On three, they all shouted and threw themselves at the port side. Max brought up his arm to cover his head. This time the bus rocked again,

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though no more than it would be by the wind coming off the escarpment this time of year.

"Starboard!" Georgiev ordered, and with a roar, they immediately threw themselves at the other side. Several men tumbled to the floor in the dark, but despite the blindness and swearing, the rock on the other side was bigger.

Georgiev got them cheering and clapping for themselves, then set up a rhythm, charging one side then the other. As Max persisted in staying in his seat, knees and elbows hit him with every rush, even though he pulled his legs up on the seat. He deflected some blows, braced and took the others.

"Come on," Vasily shouted, all excited.

Pounding from the compartment behind them led to a shouted exchange of plans. On the first combined rush, the two compartments ran toward different sides, canceling each other's efforts. One of the young men leaned up against the back wall and yelled, "Starboard, you morons, starboard!"

"Hurry," Georgiev shouted. "We're almost through Lost Angeles!"

Renewed effort in both cars quickly led to rocking until the bus tipped up, wheels off the ground. As it swerved suddenly on the road, bouncing down again, the men fell silent, all but two or three forgetting to finish the charge back to the other side.

"That's it, we can do it!" Georgiev shouted. "Come on, get up, let's start over!"

The men were so absorbed in rocking the bus that only Max noticed it slowing or saw the headlights of the dustskimmers outside. The bus braked to a stop as a row of floodlights cut through the barred windows, freezing the unshaven, sunken-eyed faces of Max's fellow prisoners in a harsh light.

Guards ran over, the locks clattered to the pavement, and the door flew open. "Congratulations, that's an impressive effort, good work, men," the guard said. "Who's the senior officer here?"

Georgiev squinted as he squeezed forward through the men. "Major Benjamin Georgiev, enlisted regular service in six-four. What we'd like — "

The guard shot him, discharging enough bolt to knock down two men beside him and pimple the hairs on Max's arms a couple seat rows back.

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One of the kids shouted, tried to rush the guard, but the blue crackle from the gun just missed his head as the men near him dragged him to the floor.

Angry shouts from the second compartment were silenced by the sound of broken windows and a barrage of fire.

"Do we have another senior officer in here?" the guard asked. Vasily and a couple others looked toward Max, but he shook his head.

"Do we have someone else in charge?" the guard asked. When no one spoke, he said, "Good, because I'm a big believer in individual responsibility, and if anything else happens, I will hold each and every one of you individually responsible. Do I make myself clear?"

He grabbed Georgiev by the back of his shirt and dragged his body, face first, down the steps and outside. Other guards, nervous, guns up, shut and locked the doors again.

Vasily slumped down in the seat beside Max, his face a pale mask of disbelief and despair.

"Don't worry," Max said. "Georgiev is probably just faking it."

The bus started rolling again, this time the skimmers flanking it in clear view. The city shrank behind them, and in moments, dust and grit came through the window, getting in Max's eyes and under his tongue. Elsewhere in the darkened bus, someone coughed. A couple others whispered that they should have prepared weapons from the broken glass and jumped the guard. Retrospect always gave you a better plan.

Out of the corner of his eye, Max saw one of the kids stand up toward the side of the bus and unzip his pants to relieve himself.

"You might want to save that for drinking later," Max shouted. Some of the men around them laughed; some didn't.

"I got nothing to save it in," the kid shouted back, which was true. "You want to come over, use it like a drinking fountain?"

Max smiled, and his lips cracked. "Nah, don't think I want to touch that handle."

Beside him, Vasily rubbed his throat. "I would do anything right now for a bathroom," he whispered. "Hell, I'd personally murder Mallove for something to eat or some water to drink."

Max's own throat was parched and his stomach had been growling for hours. With a glance around, he unrolled the stolen fruitein bar from the waist of his pants. He tried to tear it open with his hands, couldn't, ripped

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it open with his teeth. After breaking the bar in half, he said, "Sh," and pressed half into Vasily's palm.

"What? What's — "

"Sh!" Then softly, Max added, "Eat it slow."

He saw the blue shadow of Vasily's hand shove the whole thing into his mouth. He tried to chew it slowly, but swallowed before Max ate his first small piece.

"Is there more?" Vasily whispered.

"No, that's all."

Later, while Max finished the last piece of the bar, Vasily asked, "Why did you share it?"

"Because where we're going, I'll need friends more than I need food right now. Can we look out for each other?"

"Yeah, of course," Vasily whispered. "Whatever you need, whatever I can do, I'm the man."

Max nodded, as if a contract had been signed, and Vasily dipped his head in return. Such a slight gesture in the dark. Vasily's stomach rumbled and he crossed his hands over it. As the bus rolled on through the dark, Max searched his lap for crumbs, licking them off his finger, one by one. Wind coursed over the flatlands and through the broken windows, carrying a hint of salt and moisture.

All that was missing was the smell of compost and blood to complete the reclamation camp stink. As a political officer, he'd visited them more than once.

Men around him shifted, tried to sleep, but Max stared straight ahead into the rushing night.

SUNRISE, HARSH and unrelenting, cast brightness on their squalor even through the unbroken, tinted windows. The bus smelled of urine, shit, and sweat. Get used to it, Max told himself. His back ached and his legs were stiff from too many hours in the unyielding seat. In one corner, someone sobbed.

"That's Machete Ridge," Max said, pointing to a sharp line on the horizon. Vasily leaned across Max to look. "Do you see that bump, up there beside the road?" Max asked.

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"That's the reclamation camp," Vasily said.

"That's Faraway Farms. It used to be a reclamation camp." Twenty years ago, Faraway Farms was the end of the line. Now it was just one more extension settlement on the coast, a few thousand people occupying rows of low brown buildings built around a series of narrow field-ponds.

"Maybe we'll stop here," Vasily suggested.

"Be wary of hope," Max warned quietly. "It'd be too hard to guard everyone here. Too many other people, too much access to boats and skimmers."

Still, an hour later, when the bus pulled over to the fresh water cisterns outside of Faraway, even Max had to fight against hope.

When he saw the guards hooking up a fire hose, he gave up hope and clawed his way over the benches to reach one of the open windows first. For a few blissful seconds, Max's face was drenched as he opened his throat to gulp down the blast of water. Then he was fighting the weight of men on his back, crushing him for a drink. He was saved when the hose moved along to another window and the mass of bodies tumbled over the seatbacks after it. Everyone got at least a trickle of water, all except for two men too sick, or weak, to move, who lay moaning at the front end of the car. Max thought they were the ones caught by the shot that killed Georgiev. Men stretched their arms through the bars, begging for more, as the guards moved to the next car.

Max returned to his bench — he thought of it as his bench now, every man had marked out his two square feet of bus — and grunted as he sat. His whole body ached, needing exercise, a chance to stretch. Normally, he'd walk, if only to pace the aisle of the bus, but the aisle was filled too. A few men had stretched across the bench backs, feet on one seat, hands on another, to do pushups, and others did chin-ups on the hanging straps. Max would do that soon, if he had to, to keep his strength. Of course, that was a hard choice too: spend his energy, not knowing when he'd eat or drink next, or save it in reserve.

Vasily plopped down, hair plastered to his head. He was scraping drops of water off his face, pushing them into his mouth. "I wouldn't treat animals this way," he told Max.

"That's rather the point," Max said, imitating him, feeling the scratch of his unshaven skin under the droplets.

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"Your face is cut up pretty bad."

"Is it?" He tasted the sharpness of blood on his fingertips, saw the bright red. "Must have been some glass shards in the window, got blown out by the blast of water."

"When will we stop?"

"We've been on the road maybe twelve, fourteen hours. I forget where all the camps are now, but we're not even halfway there."

"Oh, Jesus," Vasily said.

In the old days, during the schism, the men sent off to the reclamation camps for their religious beliefs — or disbeliefs — would pray to God. Max prayed to Drozhin. During the purge, Intelligence would be desperate for information. Obermeyer would check the dropboxes, realize Max was out there, and start looking for him. Survive long enough to give them time to find him: that was Max's sole faith.

"I can't believe they're sending me to the reclamation camps," Vasily said. "I didn't do anything to deserve being treated like a murderer or a rapist."

"So don't let them turn you into one," Max said. "Besides, the worst crime is still having the wrong beliefs."

"But I did everything I was supposed to do, I enlisted in the government after my mandatory service, I — "

"Get over it. Keep your head low, do what you need to do to survive."

"Do what I have to do to survive," Vasily said, letting out a deep breath. He seemed like a decent guy, Max thought, not used to thinking, but thinking hard now. "Why did we have a revolution?" he asked. "I thought it was supposed to put a stop to this."

Max remembered those days. The church schismed, and different groups insisted that they had the only true beliefs. With life depending on limited resources, each side wanted everything for the true believers. Even after the terraforming increased their yields, the two sides had been willing to kill each other to prove who had the direct word from God. "The revolution bought us twenty years."

"What?"

"It's been twenty years since we had this kind of purge," Max said. Sure, there were individual murders here and there, usually arranged to look like accidents or poor health. But that was politics as usual anywhere.

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"We bought twenty years of peace where we hadn't had it more than three years in a row for two generations. You grew up in peace, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah."

"The revolution bought you that. So it was worth it. And if this purge buys us another twenty years, maybe it'll be worth it too."

Vasily shook his head. "I don't know if I can think that way. I don't know if I can ever think that way."

"Maybe you won't have to," Max said, but doubtfully.

The bus continued all day, stopping only to relieve the drivers and escorts. Sometime that night, while they shivered to keep warm, one of the sick men died. The man next to him must've noticed he was cold, called his name, saying, "Pete, Piotr, aw, man, Pete, wake up, man, aw, I can't believe this, aw, Pete, aw, man."

The body had a noticeable reek, even above the stench of piss and shit and sweat that permeated the bus. By the time the sun came up again, all the men were collapsed in a mixture of exhaustion and depression. There were no more pushups or chin-ups. The wind blew sand in through the broken windows, turning everyone a dusty brown. Max had grit in his eyes, his hair, in every wrinkle in his clothes and body.

With the hot sun baking down through the windows as they drove north toward the equator, Max leaned against the wall, listless, conserving his energy. An impromptu morgue was formed under the seats at the front of the bus, the corpse shrouded with what was left of his clothes, pulled up to cover his face. The next row back remained empty, even though there weren't enough places to sit.

Max was light-headed, weak from lack of food and lack of water. They'd gone so far. But then the reclamation camps had to be isolated. Only after the new one was turned into a settlement, like Faraway, would they fill in the space between with cistern stations and rest spots.

Terrafarms. That's what the first colonists had called them. Until the prisoners changed the name to terrorfarms. He closed his eyes.

"Are you all right?" Vasily shook his arm.

"Fine," Max said.

"No, I mean, just now, I thought you were a corpse."

"Funny," Max rasped. "Back in the space fleet my nickname was the Corpse, because I always look this way."

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"Look, I'm counting on you," Vasily said, leaning over earnestly, speaking low. "I don't want to end up dead."

Max felt sorry for him. Trying to swallow the dust in his throat, he said, "Here's the thing you need to know to survive — "

He started coughing then, the grit in his dry throat damming the words, and he couldn't stop. He needed something to drink, just a sip, and it would be fine, but there was nothing. Not even sucking on his shirt, which had been soaked, gave him any moisture, just more dust, the taste of salt, and more reason to cough.

Up front, one of the men screamed, roared in senseless rage. Within seconds the gangly redhead flung himself at the walls of the bus, one side then the other, then kicked and stomped and slapped the men scattered on the benches and the floors, demanding that they do something, ordering them to get up and do something. The dustskimmers zipped in close, flanking the sides of the bus.

"Make him shut up," Max yelled hoarsely between hacks. "Hold him down." Others said the same thing from the safety of a similar distance.

At first, the men close by just tried to get out of the beserker's way, but he grabbed one and began beating his face. Others tried to pull him away, but he lashed out at them, demanding water, demanding to be let off, demanding justice — things none of them had to give him. The more they held him, the harder he thrashed, until finally one of them lost it and punched him, telling him to "Shut up, just shut up," and then they all started hitting him until they tumbled in a crushing pile to the floor.

One of the older men, a paunchy bureaucrat in his thirties, began pulling men off, ordering them to stop the beating. When they did, the beserker lay still in the aisle. Men went back to their seats, ignoring him; after a while, some came and checked on him, and later two of them dragged him up to the morgue at the front of the bus.

Vasily held his stomach. "How long is it before someone suggests we start eating the corpses?"

"Won't happen," Max said, hoping it was true.

He was thinking that another reason for having the reclamation camps out so far was that bodies could be dumped into the compost pits, and then the prisoners reported escaped and missing instead of being sent back for burial. The families got a letter saying their loved one had

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escaped, please report to the authorities if he shows up: it gave them hope and the dead man some dignity. But prisoners marked as escaped were always dead.

"It'll be worse when we get to the camps," he said.

The camps were still a couple hundred kilometers away. Sometime during the night, Max reached that stage of hunger and sleeplessness where he drifted in and out of consciousness, caught in the no-man's land between the minefield of his hallucinations and the barbed-wire of reality. With his face against the cool glass, eyes half-lidded, and a heavy weight pressing on him, he first mistook the smell of rotting algae for a dream. Then he snapped awake.

At the sudden movement, Vasily's head fell off Max's shoulder and he sagged into Max's lap. Max shook him. "Come on," he whispered. "We have to get off here."

"Huh," Vasily said, drowsily. "What?"

"Sh," Max said. "We won't live to the next camp." He shoved Vasily aside and stepped over the bodies and around the seats to the doorwell. He grabbed the man propped upright on the steps. "Hey, there's a bench open, back there — I need to stand a while."

The man, sunken-eyed, peered over the seats, full of desire and mistrust.

"You won't get a second chance," Max said. "Promise I won't want it back."

The man rose awkwardly, crabbed his way past Vasily to the empty bench. Vasily squeezed into the doorwell next to Max. Every time he tried to ask a question, Max held up his hand for silence in case others listened.

Dawn rose like a wail of despair, thin and piercing. No man wanted to face another day of sun and heat. The bus rattled and shook, kicking up dust over the unfinished, unpaved road, so that only Max, who was looking for it as they came over each rise, saw the bunkers floating in a little pond of green surrounded by the ocean of sand and rock.

When the other men finally saw it, some declared it a mirage while others raised a feeble cheer, thinking it their destination. Max knew Intelligence would never leave them all at one camp — it would be some here, some at the next one, divided among camps, spread among strangers.

The mirage came steadily closer, resolving in dreary detail — the

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rounded corrugated roofs of the half-buried huts, scoured by the wind and sand to the same dull tones as the landscape; the surrounding fence, topped by razor wire, its sharp points cutting the sky so that it bled light; the little bowl of brown and green mud visible beyond the camp.

Bodies pressed behind Max as the bus rolled slowly to a stop and the cloud of dust settled. Past the last bunkers, Max saw the camp population standing in lines for the morning roll. The sign above the gate read:

RECLAMATION CAMP 42
"THEY WERE JUDGED EVERY MAN
ACCORDING TO THEIR WORKS."

The guards jumped off their skimmers. Most of them stood, jawing, while one went to the gate to meet the camp staff.

Max beat on the door. "Pray," he grunted to Vasily.

"For what?"

"That they come to this car, not the second one." That Drozhin got my message and has someone waiting for us, he would have added. His fist grew numb, so he banged his forearm on the door. Other men, not sure what was up, followed his lead, beating the walls and window frames.

The camp minister limped to the gate with his assistant and several guards. Dusty gray clothes, indistinguishable of rank, hung loose on their lean forms. Camp supervisors were still called ministers, instead of directors, despite the changes following the revolution, because the camps were nominally for rehabilitation. *Drozhin, come get me,* Max heresied to himself, *and I promise to be a better man.*

The minister argued with the guards, pointing at the front half of the bus: he wanted men still alive and with some fight in them — he could get more work from them before they broke. The guard listened indifferently, yelled something to the other guards, who came to Max's door aiming weapons.

Sixty bodies pressed against Max, trying to elbow their way in front of him. Max elbowed back, hooking his arm around Vasily to keep him close.

"Ten," shouted the main guard, spreading his fingers. "Just ten of you!"

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The bodies slammed forward again, banging Max's head into the doorframe. Hands tried to claw him back. The guard removed the locks and the doors opened halfway, stopped by the press of men. Max yanked his head free from a fist in his hair, bit a finger that clutched at his face, and gripped the door so that no one could push past him. A grunt, as punches landed in his kidneys, then he ducked as the gun's electric sizzle flew over their heads, setting their hair on end. One guard was yelling "Back, back!" and another grabbed a fistful of Max's shirt since he was in front, and pulled him through the door, calling, "One."

Max still had an elbow hooked around Vasily's arm, who tumbled after him. They both sprawled in the dirt.

"Make that two."

Max stood up quickly before anyone could jerk him to his feet, smoothing his clothes, tugging up his pants, as the guard counted, "Nine, Ten, and that's it. Get the hell back!" A roar of protest was followed by the sizzle of the guns, cries of pain, and the doors snapping shut.

"They're all yours," the guard told the minister. Turning to his second, he said, "Call Forty-three, tell them they need to be ready to take fifty, water a hundred, and they have to put us up for the night." To the rest of the guards he shouted, "Wheel up, wheel up, we're moving out!"

Guards closed and locked the camp gate. The minister walked up and down the short line of prisoners, sucking on his teeth, as mean-looking as a starved pitbull. He wore goggles to keep the sand out of his eyes, which kept Max from reading his expressions. Finally, with the bus already a plume of dust over the hill, he turned and walked back toward the roll call. The guards shoved Max and the other prisoners after him, back toward the compound's waste pits. Max tried not to choke on the stench; he made careful note of the dead bodies laid out at pit's edge. Escapees. Nine of them, in various states of decomposition.

Vasily nudged his shoulder, whispered. "At least we're not starting off on the lowest rung in the camp."

He glanced the other direction. In front of the razor-wire fence, apart from the other rows of men, stood a clump of sunburned, emaciated Adareans. Max had noticed them, but he found it more interesting that Vasily seemed determined to ignore the dead bodies.

"Take your clothes off," one of the guards ordered. He offered no

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reason for them to strip, no pretense of inspection or health check, but he seemed so bored by the command, so ready to use his gun, that they did what he said immediately. The earlier conditioning was already paying off.

As soon as they were naked, a guard gathered up their clothes.

The minister grinned at them. "Welcome to Camp Revelations."

F COURSE, thought Max. The camp would be named for the Bible book its verse came from. He looked again at the dead bodies and wondered if the sea or hell had delivered them up.

"Many of you noticed the verse inscribed above the entrance of our humble enterprise," the minister said. "I promise each of you that during your time here you will be judged according to your deeds."

He pulled a handkerchief from his shirt pocket, shook the dust from it, and wiped his goggles clean. Then he walked down the line, looking each one of them over.

"My name is Minister Pappas, but you may call me sir. If you ever address me at all, which is not something I encourage you to do. You are penitents and you are here to do penance for your crimes. There are guards and deacons in this camp, and you will respect them just as if they were me."

The guards were regular service, but Max knew if they posted out here they either weren't very bright or had some kind of pathology. Deacons were prisoners trusted to act like guards, except they weren't trusted enough to have their fingerprints keyed to the guns.

"Your work here will be to turn this valley from desert to oasis," the minister said. Behind him, a few hundred prisoners stood in ranks, like cans on a store shelf or pieces off an assembly line. Beyond them, beyond the razor-wire fence, the low green slopes reached up to the raw, wind-scarred hilltops and the sere blue sky.

"Three kilometers over that hill lies the sea. All of you remember the stories about the first settlers — that's what you do now. You carry the rocks to the sea, bring back the algae, and we seed it with enzymes and bacteria and earthworms to create topsoil for farming. In a decade, these hills will be covered with plants and trees."

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Max didn't plan on being here in a decade to see it, though he knew some of these men would.

"At this moment," the minister said, tucking the handkerchief back in his pocket, "I would draw your attention to the corpses you see in front of you. Those are your camp uniforms. You are expected to dress appropriately at all times."

Max was old enough to remember the shortages of food and basic supplies the winter after the nuclear bombing of New Nazareth. Without the meanest rags to wear, even the strongest died. So he broke the line and ran to the corpses, hurrying to the end where they looked only a day or two dead instead of weeks. There was a cleaner uniform on one of the bigger Adareans, but he grabbed the ankle of the one closest to his own size — the body weighed no more than a stick — and yanked off the soiled, foul-smelling overalls. He felt the arms crack as he tugged the top off the dead man's back.

This was meant to shame him, classic psychological manipulation, but he would not be shamed by survival. He thrust his legs into the pants one at a time. The orange uniform, dulled by sun and sand, fit him no worse than his other clothes and had the advantage of needing no belt. The sandals were no worse than his shoes. He took the straw hat off the dead man's face and put it on his head, returning to his place in line while the others pulled on their uniforms.

Only Vasily remained, wandering naked from corpse to corpse. "What? What am I supposed to wear?"

"That's your problem, not mine," one of the guards said, backing him up with the gun.

The other men fell back into line with Max, who began to size them up as possible partners.

Vasily hopped frantically between the corpses while the guards chuckled at him. "I need a uniform. You have to — "

"No," the minister said, who had probably chosen the number of prisoners with this amusement in mind. "We don't have to do anything."

"Wait," Vasily shouted. He walked over toward the clump of Adareans and pointed to the one in front. "Give me that pig-man's uniform. I deserve it more than him."

Nothing might have happened then — Vasily was a newbie, lower

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than the lowest, and not worthy of tolerance — except that the Adarean balled his hand into a fist.

That slight gesture, Max realized, tipped the scales. The deacons wouldn't tolerate even a small show of defiance from a fellow prisoner, especially a pig-man. One ran over and cuffed the Adarean on the back of the head; a second arrived an instant later, and cracked his knees with a pipe, knocked him to the ground. Guards shifted position, using their guns to keep the other Adareans at bay. The man in the tower rang a bell and brought up his sniper rifle.

While all this happened, Vasily hovered around the guards, desperate, shouting, "Don't stop there, I'm one of you, I'm a human being!"

The deacons looked at the minister, who paused to regard Vasily. The Adarean pushed himself up from the dirt, and one of the deacons kicked him — the Adarean caught his foot and shoved it away.

Without waiting for the minister's approval, the deacons fell on the Adarean, striking and kicking him with a fury they had saved up from a thousand other unanswered frustrations, fears, and slights.

Vasily shouldered his way between them. "Don't mess up my uniform!" He put his arm around the Adarean's neck and, while the deacons pinned him, choked until he was still.

Moments later the deacons dragged another body over to the compost pits. They tossed it directly into the waste, and added the other naked corpses after it.

The minister walked down the line, pausing when he reached Vasily. The handkerchief in his pocket was the color of Vasily's faded orange uniform. "What did you think you were doing?"

"What I needed to do, sir."

"You won't do it again without my permission first. You clear about that?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll do just fine then," the minister said. He turned to his camp clerk, a prisoner carrying an antique keypad, and said, "Enter ten new penitents on the rolls, record nine runaways, and mark one piece of trash disposed."

He moved along the line, stopping to inspect each man for a few seconds as if he were looking for something. He found it when he reached

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Max, because he stood there, staring, then slipped his hands into his pockets.

"You," he drawled, "already look like a corpse."

"That was my nickname in the space fleet, sir," Max replied, staring straight ahead, past the goggled face. "It's just what I look like, sir."

After a long pause, the minister sucked on his teeth, turned to the deacon with the keypad, and said, "Help me remember something here. Did I ask him a question?"

"No, sir, you didn't."

"And did he speak to me anyway?"

"Yes, sir, I believe he did."

Max cursed himself silently. It was all about demonstrating power. He'd guessed right on the uniforms, but made a mistake here. The only thing he could do was keep his head down, take his punishment, and survive it.

The minister sucked his teeth again, leaned over and got right in Max's face. His breath smelled like onions and tooth decay. "That group over there," he said, with a nod toward the Adareans, "they're one short. You go take that spot."

Max hesitated. Being with the Adareans was a death sentence, but a slow one. He had the feeling that defying the camp minister, here, at this moment, would mean his immediate death.

Spinning on his heel, he turned and walked crisply over to the small group of Adareans: the guards and deacons laughed behind him, while the minister assigned the other nine men to work groups in the main camp.

Max studied the Adareans. They were all taller than he, a half a meter or more, bred for a planet with lower gravity. Their skin color ranged from grass green to sandy brown; their hair ranged from thick sawgrass to normal human, gray. Their features were soft, halfway between male and female, but the expressions on their faces were uniformly hostile. No one met his gaze.

"Hi, I'm Max," he said. There was no response. He wanted to ask where the food and water were, but decided not to waste his energy.

"All right, time to go to work," the minister shouted. "It's going to be another scorcher and I don't want no more of you dying from heat stroke.

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So it's light work today in the gardens and turning the fields. You can get your assignments from Smith. Prayer Block 13 has sea duty."

"Let me guess, we're Prayer Block 13," Max said.

After a moment of silence, during which the Adareans exchanged glances with one another, the gray-haired one said, "Yes."

"Ah." Sea duty no doubt entailed carrying rocks to the sea. Max tilted his head, looked right into the gray-haired Adarean's eyes. "Where's the water?"

When no one answered him, he began to think that this was an immediate death sentence as well. He shut down his senses and turned his back on the Adareans. The less he had to do with them, the more likely he was to survive.

A GUARD WITH a machine gun directed them toward the camp's back gate. He was flanked by two deacons wearing orange jumpsuits that didn't stink like death. Max went obediently.

At the gate, another deacon said, "Take a basket."

Outside the gate stood a pile of wire baskets, each a half meter in diameter and not quite as tall. He grabbed one by the rim as he passed by, then saw that it had a twisted-wire strap so he could drag it by his wrist or carry it slung over his shoulder. The Adareans were slinging their baskets over their shoulders, so he did too.

In a single file, with the guard riding flank on a four-wheeled rockjumper, they climbed uphill to the meadows. Max smelled the meadows before they crossed the lip of the hill and he saw them spread out below, a shallow field of green-brown sludge in a sheltered bowl of dust and sandstone. A dirty stream flowed through the middle of the field.

"Load up!" shouted the deacon.

Max followed the Adareans to the edge of the sludge-field and loaded his basket with rocks, just like they did. Dust caked his fingers, stone chipped his nails. Sparing an eye for the Adareans working around him, he filled his basket no more than they did, then waited until they led the way, dragging their baskets single file, over the hill to the ocean. There were grooves in the exposed bedrock on either side of the path made by the weight of the baskets.

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Half the Adareans were in front of Max, half behind. A tall one, with cheekbones like knife cuts and dark green veins in his light green skin, called out, "Swimmer or drowner?"

The answers came back down the line. "Drowner." "Drowner." "Drowner."

One of the deacons walking along the path said, "I'm in. Cup of soup says he's a drowner within a month."

The other deacon and the guard laughed.

"Two cups of soup says he's a swimmer." The old man, the one with the gray hair.

"You say that about everyone," Cheekbones ribbed him.

Max didn't understand what was going on. He had grown up almost living in the water. "I can swim."

Cheekbones chuckled, then all the Adareans chuckled, and the deacons and the guard laughed out loud again.

"*Definitely* a drowner," Cheekbones said.

"You're going to owe me two cups of soup," the deacon told the old man.

More puzzled than before, Max held his tongue.

The old man looked over his shoulder, saw Max's expression. "Everyone in camp is either a swimmer or a drowner."

"You mean everyone's a drowner," the guard shouted from the back of the four-wheeler. He wore goggles like the camp minister, carried his gun across his lap. "All of you drown eventually, once you get tired of swimming. And some of you come through the gates already tired."

Cheekbones lowered his head. "And some come in here ready to build a raft out of other people's bodies just to stay afloat."

Max's basket caught on a bump in the groove, yanking him off balance. He righted himself quickly, but his stumble was noticed.

"That's your swimmer?" the deacon asked the old Adarean, who just shrugged. The deacon laughed and rubbed his belly. "I'm looking forward to that soup — two cups, mmm-mmm!"

The next time Max's basket caught on a hump, he let the wire cut his wrist rather than pull him off balance. He paused, tugged it over the hump, and kept on walking. He had survived worse.

* * *

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Joy is infinite in its varieties but all misery is the same. In that way, every day in the camp was much like another. Max only had to learn the routine and survive the misery. He could do that.

At sunup, the blare of a siren roused them from their narrow metal bunks. Max, as the new man, had the bunk next to the door, right beside the siren's speaker. On the first morning, it nearly gave him a heart attack. By the third day, it was barely enough to startle him awake.

Every morning, on the way out the door, the old Adarean would stop Max and say, "How are you today?"

Every morning, Max answered, "Still swimming."

For breakfast the camp kitchen served out a small ball of rice, plain, unseasoned, which they ate with their fingers. Every day, after breakfast, the Adareans were sent to sea duty. Sometimes the other work details joined them too, but now, at the height of summer, the minister had them seeding, weeding, and tending fields.

The stench of decomposition in the meadows choked Max on the first day; after that, it was just a constant plateau of the unbearable which must be born. Not nearly as bad as the waste pits at the edge of the camp. By watching the Adareans, he learned the trick to loading his basket with rocks. If it was too full, you drained your energy too fast, but if it was too empty the deacons would beat you. The trick was to stack the rocks so that there were hollow spaces between them, making the basket look fuller than it was.

The dismal kilometers to the ocean ended in a long stone jetty that jutted out into the bay. They dragged their baskets to the end and dumped them. The rocks sank out of sight in the deep water and the jetty slowly grew.

A short pontoon dock tethered to the end of the jetty rolled with the slight motion of the water. Its rhythm was matched by the undulations of the purple-brown algae that covered the bay from one side to the other. The deacons sat in a boat, using skimmers to push the algae into mounds around the end of the dock. Once you dumped the rocks, you had to fill your basket with the weed.

This was the most disheartening part of the work. There was no way to cheat on the load and the journey back to the meadows was all uphill. If you dragged the baskets, the algae would snag on every sharp rock, leak

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with every bump, so you had to sling them over your back and carry them or the guards would beat you. The water running down your back felt cool at first, until it chafed your skin raw. The moment you were done dumping your basket, you had to start gathering rocks again. Or the guards would beat you.

At midday, there was a break for a cup of tuber soup and a cup of water. Some days the soup was so thin and the water so cloudy it was hard to tell the difference between the two. Afterward, it was back to rocks and weeds, rocks and weeds, until sunset. Back at camp, they received another cup of water and half a ball of rice, some days with vegetables from the terraced gardens close to camp. Luckily, Max was small and had been malnourished as a child, so he needed fewer calories than most men. Hunger was, if not a friend, something like an irascible but familiar uncle.

There was variation in this routine, but it was not the stuff of joy, and so was all the same in its difference.

During his first days in camp, the sun burned his pale skin, turning his neck and forearms and ankles pink, then red. At night he peeled away the dead layers of skin, folding it into his mouth, chewing it slowly.

One day, a rock he was lifting into his basket slipped from his hands and gashed his shin, tearing his pants and banging his leg badly enough that he limped for a week.

But he survived that too.

Even slight blessings came with a bitter edge. When rain fell, as it did several times, sudden cloudbursts that scoured the rocks and then evaporated like water on a frying pan, everyone in camp, guard and deacon and penitent, ran outside to wash themselves and their clothes, to open their mouths to the sky and drink clean water that didn't taste like sand or iron, to fill whatever cup or bowl they had for later, an extra portion that only left them longing for more.

Comparisons to others were just as bitter; for example the realization one day, as he was pretending to drop his hat accidentally in the water so that it would cool his head as he worked, that the Adareans worked without hats, with their overalls opened, because they took energy from the sun, however slight, even while it beat Max down and drained him.

Max survived that too, and survived the days when the two types of bitterness combined. He was filling his basket at the dock one day when

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he spotted tiny silver flashes in the green mess of algae. Minnows. Careful not to let the guard or deacons see him, he found and swallowed seven of them on the walk back to the meadow. Every load after that, he looked for them again, finding a few every fourth or fifth day.

"You spread that weed awfully carefully," he heard a voice say one day while he was bent over the edge of the meadow.

He squinted, the glare of the sun knifing under the brim of his hat. A deacon, dressed in boots off some new prisoner, a canteen hanging from his waist, smacked a length of metal pipe against his open palm.

"Vasily," Max said.

Vasily looked both ways to make sure no one was near. "Don't go greenmouth on me, Max. That stuff's poison. I already seen a guy crap himself to death."

"Yeah, I know better." Max finished spreading the weed, grabbed a stone, rolled it into his basket.

"That's the way," Vasily said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, yellow onion, and bit into it like an apple. Still crunching, he walked behind some Adareans and poked them between the shoulder blades with the pipe.

Max turned away, forgetting he was there.

His plan for survival had depended on getting help from a partner within the camp until someone outside found his messages and came for him. The first part had failed and the second had come to nothing, but he would do what he had to do to survive. He would be patient, conserve his energy, and when his chance came, he would take it.

One night, after dark when they were all lying in their bunks, the old Adarean came up and sat across from him, and asked, "How do you do it?"

Max pushed up on his elbows. "Do what?"

"How do you keep yourself apart from us, apart from everyone?"

Max lay back down, closed his eyes. "It's easy."

"It's been weeks and still you stay alone."

"A man is born alone and he dies alone," Max said.

"Shit on that." The other Adareans came down to his end of the bunker, quietly taking up seats on the beds and floor around him in the dark, like a convocation of ghosts. Snickering ghosts. Max, feeling threatened, snapped up.

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"You have your beliefs, I have mine," he said.

"No one is alone," the Adarean said. "Our first experience is being connected. We spend nine months in the womb connected to our mother. You say we're born alone, but childbirth is always an experience shared by mother *and* child. In even the most barbaric and backward places — "

"Like this planet," someone said, to more snickers.

" — a third person is there to catch us when we leave the womb and lift us to our mother's breast. The whole experience of birth is one of connection, an affirmation of it, in spite of the pain."

"That's just one moment," Max said.

"Are you serious?" the Adarean begged. "We spend the first years of our life completely dependent on others, connected to them to meet our every need. They take care of us and we return love. When we reach puberty and are driven by hormones away from our first caregivers, we are moved toward other people — mentors, friends, sexual partners."

One of the Adareans nudged another, who grunted. Max didn't look to see who it was, but the old man's head turned.

"See," the Adarean said. "When we're wounded or hurt, our natural reflex, our inborn trait, is to make noise. We cry out, knowing that others will respond. Our natural reaction is to turn toward those who cry out in pain. The lack of empathy is a defect, a loss of the most fundamental human trait."

"You say that, even after the way the guards treat you?"

"What? You don't see it as a defect in *their* character?"

"That's not what I'm saying."

"What are you saying?" the old Adarean asked patiently.

Max swung his legs over the edge of his bunk and sat up straight. "What are you doing here on our planet?" He pointed his finger at all of them. "Why are you here?"

The Adareans exchanged glances. As always, they seemed to be thinking it over together before any of them spoke. Max thought he detected a scent in the air, something sharp.

"We come here to trade," one of them offered, a sandy-faced man with burr-like hair. "This is the only place in the galaxy that you can find machine-made goods. Everywhere else, things are either fabrikated, the exact same every time, or handmade, individual and different. But your

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factories make these odd items that are at once identical and yet each of which shows some individual variation from a human hand."

Max dismissed that with a wave of his hand. He worked in political education and knew spin when he heard it. "You could trade for that from space. I mean the real reason."

The odor in the air turned bittersweet, then faded. "Do you have any idea how extraordinary the people of your planet are?" the old man said finally. "The settlers here spoke a dozen languages, came from countries that had been enemies with one another, and yet they united in a single purpose, to transform this desert of a world that no one else saw value in."

"Too bad they left us to finish the work," Max said.

The green-skinned Adarean murmured, "Amen."

"We're here by force," the old Adarean said, "but those first settlers came of their own free will, with hardly any real chance of survival, and they not only survived, but thrived. What amazing faith that took. They formed human chains, every man, woman, and child, dredging life from the sea — "

"I know my own history," Max said. "You can skip the kindergarten lesson. Unless you want to make a faith brigade and pass buckets around the room."

The Adarean shifted, turned his head toward the others, who leaned together, without speaking. A moment later, he said, "We want to honor the spirit of the twentieth century."

That made less sense to Max than anything. Yes, his people wanted to hold time back to the twentieth century, but the Adareans had advanced far beyond that. "What? You mean like the discovery of the double helix, the first genome projects?"

"More than that," the Adarean said. "It's the great century of political change, of people like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. For the first time in history, people could peacefully oppose their governments; for the first time, without the use of violence, they could force their governments to change. It is the century where technology made real democracy possible, immediate, functional, on a large scale, for the first time ever."

"Huh," Max said, looking at their tiny bunker, their too small beds, their emaciated bodies. "And here I always thought of it as the century of

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poison gas and nuclear bombs, the century of concentration camps and gulags, the century of murder, mass produced."

"It is that too," the old Adarean said after a pause. "But we have a choice."

"Doesn't feel like a choice to me," Max said. "So you're saying you're here, basically, because we're a big historical amusement park?"

The tall, green-veined Adarean grunted.

"That's not — " the old man said.

"Him," Max interrupted, pointing to the tall one. "Isn't he the one who said we all drown eventually? That's not by choice and it's not amusing."

"I didn't say that," the green Adarean said coldly.

The old Adarean reached out, squeezed the other man's leg. "We take turns holding each other up so that we don't drown too soon."

"If you say so," Max said.

The old man shifted, picked up something beside him in the dark. "Here," he said, offering it to Max. "You've been swimming for a month. I won my bet. I figure you deserve one of the two cups of soup."

Max took it in both hands, held it up to his face. It smelled like onion, potato, and dill.

The old Adarean reached out, touched the back of Max's hand, then went back to his own bunk. One by one, the Adareans stood up, each one touching him, a squeeze on the shoulder, a light clap on the back, before returning to their own space. The green-skinned Adarean was the last to rise, and the only one not to touch Max.

"What I said was, *you're* a drowner," he said. "I still think you're a drowner."

When he turned away, Max said, "What's your name?"

He stopped, his body angled half toward Max, half away. "We don't have individual names anymore. We're trash, pig-men, monsters. Don't you listen?"

"Did you ever hear the saying that those who don't study history are doomed to repeat it?"

The Adarean stopped. "Yes."

"Those who do study history are doomed to see the repetition coming."

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The Adarean smirked, then walked back to his bed. Max leaned his mouth over the rim of the cup, resting it there for a long time, savoring the smell, without taking a sip. Outside, the wind kicked up. Sand skittered like thousands of tiny feet over the metal roof of their hut.

Nothing had changed, Max told himself. He needed to be patient, conserve his energy, wait for a chance to improve his situation, then take it. When the chance came, he could do what Vasily did, do what he had to do, and he would have water, extra food, a pair of boots.

He sipped the soup slowly, so that it seemed to last all night, and when it was done, for the first time in a month, his belly felt almost full.

THE WEEKS PASSED until Turning Day. In the meadow, the hundreds of acres of sludge on the hillsides became dirt faster when it was turned and mixed with sand. The weeds, the volunteer plants, were uprooted and mixed with the compost.

Every part of the camp smelled like decay. From the fecal stench of the waste pits on the edge of the camps, to the rotting vegetable stench of the meadow, to the smell of rust in their beds and bunkers and bowls, to the slow decay of their own bodies. But Turning Day was the worst; on Turning Day the men became one with the decay. The camp's full count of penitents waded out into the morass, a single long line of misery, churning the decomposing soup with their bare hands. The minister sat beneath an umbrella, occasionally pausing to wipe his goggles, as he described his plans for terraced gardens and a vast expanse of fields.

"What we are going to do here," the minister shouted, "is cover a square kilometer with topsoil, to a depth of a meter. It'll be amazing, the biggest, most beautiful city on the planet, right here, right on this spot. General Kostigan has told me personally what great work we're accomplishing here."

He went on and on that way, until it was four square kilometers and a new Garden of Eden. But all Max heard was the name of Kostigan, who would be happy to kill him if he ever got the chance. He kept his head down, as if it would avert Kostigan's gaze, and turned over armful after armful of wet, stinking sludge, until he was caked with it and the stench soaked into his skin and became part of him.

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In books and vids, terraforming was always portrayed as some heroic effort, the conclusion foregone. But this is how it was really done, with sludge and sweat and aching backs. Meanwhile, it was hard not to be aware that planets, like men, were incredibly resistant to change. All the colonists of Jesusalem could die tomorrow, and the planet would hardly notice. Year by year it would erase their effort and crawl back toward the course it had previously chosen.

"Look," whispered a voice next to Max, pulling him from his reverie. He kept his head ducked, plunging his hand back into the muck.

"Look," the voice repeated. It was the big, green-skinned Adarean.

Max glanced at the camp guards first. The minister, taking a break from his sermon, stood and fanned himself with his hat. The guards were clustered around a keg of water. He turned his head the other way to glance at the Adarean.

The tall man pushed his arms down into the muck, turning over a mixture of greens and weeds. When his hand came out it held a small, yellow potato. He ripped the greens off and tucked the potato inside his shirt, showing Max how to do the same. "We planted them," he whispered, with a nod of his head toward an outcrop of boulders on the hillside. "Between here and those rocks."

Max realized that he may have already felt a couple of the potatoes, but dumped them, thinking they were stones. He returned to the sludge with interest. The first potato he found sat in his hand like a lump of gold. With furtive glances to either side, he pretended to wipe his nose, and slipped it into his mouth. When he bit into it one of his teeth came loose, so he chewed slowly, carefully, until every bit was gone. It tasted like the mud, and the raw starch filmed his mouth. But it was glorious. Meredith used to cook potatoes in olive oil with a pinch of salt and some parsley; when he tried to remember what their kitchen looked like, it was just a blur.

A rock bounced off his shoulder. A guard standing clear of the muck shouted at him. "Back to work!"

He bent over at once and began turning the sludge. "I'm swimming," he mumbled as he dog-paddled the knee-deep sludge. "I'm still swimming."

Although he wasn't sure where he was swimming to anymore. That's when he knew he might be sinking.

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They woke up to winds so strong that sand whistled through every crack in their bunker, forming tiny dunes in the corners and around the legs of their cots.

On the way to roll call, beneath the black roil of sky, Max saw three escapees laid out by the waste pits, one of them new since the day before, and all of them from prayer blocks with easier work than his. He wondered how long it would be until he ended up there too. He'd lost two teeth and a third was loose; what little body fat he had before was gone, and his knee buckled every time he put weight on it wrong; the sores on his back wept constantly.

They had to hold their hats on their heads while they stood in line, and the gusts were so powerful that they picked men up off their feet and tumbled them into the fence. Max was lucky he had the bigger Adareans for a windbreak. The camp second shouted something about an off-season hurricane, too far north, gave them all a second serving of breakfast and told them to save it, then dismissed them back to their prayer blocks for the duration.

By the time the rain pelted the roof like an avalanche of gravel, they were sitting around the small room in the dark, filling their cups from drips in the roof. It was enough not to be working for a day.

Max looked at the tall green Adarean and said, "It feels like Christmas, only we need something to celebrate with."

"I see sand and water," he said. "If we mix them together we could have mud."

"No, outside," Max said. "While the storm's at its worst, before anyone else thinks of it."

They squeezed out the door, the wind banging it shut behind them, and, with Max clinging to the bigger man, made their way over to the camp kitchen. No could see them in the deluge — they could barely see a few feet in front of their own faces.

Max wiped the water from his eyes and peered into the darkened room. "Be quick," he shouted above the roar of the storm. "Grab anything you can carry."

While the Adarean gathered up loaves of pumpkin bread and raw vegetables, Max used a can to smash the lock off a side closet. "Bullseye."

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"What is it?" the Adarean asked.

"I never yet knew a military officer who, given access to potatoes and time, would not construct a still." The door banged behind them and they jumped, but it was only a trick of the wind. Max tucked bottles in his shirt until it was full, took another in his hand. "Let's go. By lunch time, the minister will think to place a guard here."

When they shoved their way back into the bunker, soaked like a pair of muddy sponges, they were greeted with concern, then celebration. While the Adareans passed around the first loaf of bread, Max opened a bottle and swallowed what was simultaneously the worst and sweetest alcohol he'd ever tasted.

After that, Max listened to hours of conversation, long talks about people and places back home. The tall green Adarean was a historian, the gray-haired old man some kind of freelance diplomat, the brown-skinned one a collectibles trader. Everyone had a job and a family they were concerned about. That discussion turned to plans for escape, ultimately declared impractical because there were too many men to kill — never mind the moral objections to killing, and no offense intended, Max — or too far to go once they escaped, or no one to help them once they got where they were going.

"We could always just build his garden for him," the collectibles trader said of the minister, and that led to calculations — four square kilometers to a depth of a meter was how many cubic meters, with half a cubic meter of weed per basket load.

"How many men in camp?" the diplomat asked.

"Total or just prisoners?" the trader wanted to know.

"Penitents," the diplomat said.

And while several offered a number, Max said, "You mean penitents and pig-men." Which was greeted with silence, then a burst of laughter, and a discussion of whether Max counted as a penitent or pig-man, until the old man picked up the math again by asking, "What's the most loads you've ever carried in a day?"

"Seventeen," said the green Adarean, the historian, and several others thought that was too many, although one other remembered that day, and then, after an argument on maximum loads versus average, they were dividing the total number of cubic yards by the number of trips per man

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to get a minimum number of days, no, years counted in decades, to reach the goal.

"It's too many," the historian said to the final number. "I've been here almost a year and it would be too many if it were one day more."

The diplomat said something encouraging but the comment had turned the mood dark for a minute and everyone fell silent. They all sat on their beds because the floor of the bunker was flooded. Outside the wind was so strong that rain sprayed through every crack and seam, and for a moment it felt that everywhere was water and the room would fill up to the ceiling with it. Max poured the dregs of a bottle down his throat.

"You remind me of Drozhin," he said, because the silence was unbearable and it was the only thing he could think to say. That provoked outrage and questions and laughter and disbelief, and, dizzy with drink, dizzy because the aches in his body were momentarily numbed to the point he could bear them, Max heard himself saying, "No, no, I know him personally, he's just like that."

The diplomat took the bottle from Max, found it empty, and opened another. "But I thought you were a political officer. You worked in Education for Mallove, right?"

"This is way before that," Max said, leaning forward, resting on his knees. "This is back when the revolution was still a civil war. Drozhin had been Minister of Police before this purge, and when they tried to kill him, he went underground and started organizing the army that overthrew the government." It was more complicated than that, Drozhin let other people be the leaders for one thing, but those details were beside the point. "I was a teenager, but looked much younger, so I ended up being one of the first men on his staff right after the purge. He used me as a spy, since I could get in and out of the cities easily."

"Why'd you hook up with Drozhin?" the collectibles dealer interrupted.

Max shrugged. "It was a civil war. We all had to pick sides. Being on Drozhin's side probably saved my life." He took a loaf of bread that was passed to him, broke off a bite, and handed it on. "Anyway, Drozhin was just like you. He was always doing what he called victory math. How many recruits to overrun a certain post, how much fabric to make coats for all his men, how many generations until we could get back to the stars.

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He had his hand in everything, always adding and readding to get the result he wanted. He even...."

"Even what?"

A lump of bread stuck in his throat. Max swallowed. It was no secret, the things Drozhin had done. "He even calculated the number of Adareans he needed to kill to unite the people against a common enemy instead of fighting each other. He had a theory of proportions, that the more gruesome the murders, the fewer he would need to tip the scales."

This produced the same silence as before. The Adareans stared at him in the dark. They had human shapes but their faces were genderless silhouettes and their limbs, in shadow, looked like weapons. Finally, the historian said, "Drozhin wanted to go back to space? After all your people did, to preserve their technologically primitive way of life here?"

"The first space flights were in the twentieth century. Drozhin always said we had betrayed the stars by staying here." The roar of the storm, loud enough to smash all the buildings and compartments into one, suddenly disturbed Max, so he kept talking. "Anyway, and this is no shit, I won my wife from Drozhin in a card game."

There were sounds of disbelief, a bit muted, and a curious tang to the room's stale air. "Her name's Meredith," Max said. "Means guardian of the sea. I loved her smile, the way it made her cheeks dimple. Still love that. Her father had been one of Drozhin's officers in the ministry — he was killed at New Hope during the purge, so Drozhin promised to be like a father to her. We wanted to marry but Drozhin didn't approve, since I wasn't an officer and wasn't good enough for her. This went on for a while; it doesn't seem like long now, but back then we expected to be dead any day, and a month felt like forever." He reached for the bottle, took another drink.

"We were playing poker one night — there'd been a setback, and for a couple weeks the whole revolution amounted to six of us stuck in a basement at a farmhouse on the escarpment — so we were playing poker one night, during a storm like this one, when we couldn't do anything else, and I was beating Drozhin badly, beating everyone, but he was the one that mattered. Drozhin hated to lose, *hated* it more than anything, but he was out of money. He didn't have anything else I wanted, so I asked him for a commission, which meant I could marry Meredith, against everything I

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had, all in. He couldn't resist because he never gave up. I won with a straight."

The old man chuckled. "So you got your commission."

"Sort of," Max said, wiggling the loose tooth with his tongue. "Drozhin said I could have the commission, like he had promised me, but I had to pay for it. 'To support the revolution.'" He paused for effect. "He charged me the exact amount I'd won."

There was enough laughter at that to break the mood of despair and jumpstart discussion among the other Adareans. Max left out the part that he was unwilling to pay that price, but Meredith hounded him until he finally gave in.

The big green Adarean, the historian, said, "You still know Drozhin?"

"No," Max said. "No, he was an old man even then. He's dead now, just like Mallove. That's why all of us are here."

"Too bad." He reached out and squeezed Max's shoulder.

Outside, the noise stopped abruptly as the eye of the storm passed overhead. The camp was so small that any loud sound in one of the blocks carried to another, so suddenly distant conversations came through cracks widened by the wind. One of the Adareans started to sing a silly verse about a talking toaster and its pet dog, and others took up the song. Other bunkers began to sing back, trying to drown out the Adarean melody with religious hymns and patriotic songs.

Max was no singer, and neither was the historian. Both sat there, somber if not sober. "It'd be good if you still had some friends from the revolution who could help us if we broke out of here," the Adarean said.

"Yeah, it would be," Max admitted. He tilted his head up at the roof, the room. "Do you know why they call these prayer blocks?"

"No. Why?"

"Because when you're here, all your prayers to God are blocked."

After the last of the storm passed, they emerged from their blocks to find the tower down and sections of fence ripped away. The waste pits had flooded and overflowed, scattering bones and pieces of bodies with the outhouse products across the roll call ground. One of guards ran the camp's sole bulldozer, pushing waste back into the pits while the minister marched the rest of them up to the meadow.

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All the compost had been washed from the hillsides, mixing with sand and stone until it choked the stream where it flowed between the hills. If they didn't clear it out, the stream would back up until the bowl filled with water and the camp was threatened.

Under the guns of the guards, they waded waist-deep in the sludge, using their bodies as dredges, pushing the tangled mats back up the slopes. They scooped the sand-sludge mix with their bare arms until Max's skin was rubbed rash-raw. And then, when the other men were given a break, the Adareans were told to load up their baskets with rocks pulled from the blocked culvert and carry them down to the jetty.

"No need to do the same work twice," the minister explained, seemingly oblivious to the irony.

They loaded their baskets under the eyes of deacons who were antsy because the minister kept threatening to put them to work. Max groaned when he lifted his basket, even stacked as empty as possible. Too many more days of this would kill him. Today might kill him.

The historian passed him, taking a rock from the top of his basket and dropping it in his own. Several times, when they came to a hilltop, or a turn in the trail, he passed Max, or let Max pass him, taking a stone from Max's basket. On the last rise before the long road down to the ocean, he started to sing.

"A brave little toaster took a rocketship to space
Where he tried to find a planet that would save the human race.
But, O, O, O, he found a dog."

"You're terrible," Max said. "Didn't they genetically engineer perfect pitch on Adares?"

"Come on, Max, sing with me."

He started over again, and all the Adareans took up the song, which cycled right back to the beginning as soon as the toaster and his dog finished their adventure. It was a quick walk to the ocean. Vasily, the deacon in charge, followed the Adareans, tapping the end of his pipe against the boulders in time with the song. Their guard rode on the rock-jumper, rifle across his lap, parallel to their path until they came to the jetty. Two more guards were out in the boat. They'd found the pontoon dock, towed it back, tied it up again, and were now scouting the coast around the edge of the point.

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Max and the others walked out to the end of the jetty and dumped their baskets. The rocks made a hollow splash, then slowly sank from view. Max stepped aside so the other men could dump their loads. As he stood there, wire grooved in his wrist, staring at the sun sparkling on the bay, water weed-cleared by the storm, he thought it almost a beautiful spot. He wondered if Meredith made it to their safe house. He'd been gone so much, for so many years, for all of their marriage really, that he wondered if she missed him, even if she was there.

The historian's hand touched his shoulder, and he stepped past Max onto the dock, shifting his balance as it bobbed unanchored under his weight. He was still humming that ridiculous song about the toaster, basket slung over his shoulder. Max, smiling, opened his mouth to say there was no weed to carry back, as if it were good news, just discovered.

Then he saw that the basket was still full of rocks, his own load, and half Max's.

The historian dropped it off his shoulder, and swung it once, twice, out over the water.

"Hey," Max said.

On the third swing he let go, and the basket arced into the air and dropped into the water with a cavernous splash. The loop was still fastened around the Adarean's wrist, pulling him after it.

Vasily was the first one out to the end of the pier, cursing and spinning, half-panicked. When the old man, the diplomat, ran out beside him, dropping his basket, prepared to dive in, Vasily smashed him down with his club. He kicked the old man in the stomach, drove him back along the jetty to the shore.

"We're in charge here!" he shouted. "You don't get to choose when you die, we choose! Now go, go back to the meadow!"

He ran up and down the line, beating the exhausted Adareans on their arms and shoulders if they didn't move fast enough. The guard came in close, rifle ready, looking eager to shoot. Max cowered, covering his head with hands, stumbling all the way back to the camp.

All that night in the camp, the wail of the Adareans rose over and over again, as sure as the dawn. Because of their grief, Max thought he finally understood them.

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It had always seemed to him as if he only saw half their conversations. They communicated, deliberately, through pheromones and with heightened sensitivity to very slight non-verbal cues. Even in a dark room, without words, they were never alone. In that way, they were alien.

Max sat on his bunk with his back to the wall, as far from them as possible. Yet he could smell their grief, a scent he had no words for, though it reminded him of saltwater and juniper.

At first he didn't understand why they wept and tore at their chests: hadn't he seen another Adarean die his first day in the camp? The one choked to death by Vasily? There had been no dirge then.

But he came to realize, from the way they tried to comfort one another that it was not the death they grieved — death was inevitable — but the suicide. The historian's choice to be alone, to cut himself apart.

Max blocked his ears, but he still heard the dirging. He pulled a blanket over his head, but that didn't help.

Late into the night, the other bunks shouted at them to stop, their voices sometimes rising above the dirge, sometimes falling into the cracks of silence.

Near morning, exhausted, depleted, Max heard a rattling at the door and then it came open.

Vasily stood there.

"Shut up!" he yelled. "Shut the hell up so we can sleep!"

He seemed fearful to come inside alone. When the Adareans ignored him, he turned to Max, whose bunk was beside the door. "You've got to help me out here. The other penitents, they blame *me* for this. I told them there was no way to stop the pig-man from drowning, but they don't care. We're all exhausted, nobody's slept, and we have to work all day tomorrow. And now the lights just came on in the minister's cabin. The other deacons, they say I got to fix this, or I'm going to lose *my* spot."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

Vasily licked his lips, checked to see who was outside. "Look, I don't want to come in there, all right. But you, you make them shut up, you make them be quiet, and I promise we get you out. You don't belong in here with these animals. You make them shut up, you get moved to a regular bunker."

Max turned his head away.

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"Right now, I'll take you with me right now, over to our block. Just do what you need to do, make them shut up."

Max held his head in his hands, squeezed it to make the pounding stop. So. Vasily came through for him after all; one of the seeds Max had planted was finally ready for harvest. If he got into a better block, if he worked less, if he got more food, he could survive. Eventually, the purge would end.

"Look, you've got to decide fast," Vasily said. "There's something going on in the minister's office, so we got to fix this now or I get blamed for everything."

It would be easy, Max thought. If he killed the diplomat, maybe broke his neck, it would break the rhythm of their lament and change their mood completely. He might not even have to kill him, just hurt him, maybe leave him unconscious. All he would need was six, seven seconds. No more than he needed to murder that double agent Lukinov during his last mission. During the brief moment of confusion that followed, he could get out the door with Vasily.

"There are guards coming," Vasily said, "so it's now or never. If the guards come, I can't be responsible for what they do. They might just compost everyone in the bunker, including you. You have to choose now — are you in or out?"

Max swung his legs off the bunk, walked over to the old man, who was seated on the floor, and kneeled behind him. He slid his hands up the old man's shoulders, leaned forward, and whispered in his ear.

"Still swimming," Max said. "Remember that we're still swimming."

The diplomat turned his head and the dirge faltered.

"Hey, Vasily," Max said. "You can go choke yourself."

When Vasily didn't respond, he looked up. The deacon was flanked by two guards, guns drawn, standing to either side of him in the doorway. So, Max thought, he might not swim that much longer after all.

"Are you Colonel Maxim Nikomedes?" the first guard asked.

Max said, "Huh?"

"Are you Colonel Nikomedes?" he snapped.

"Yes, I am."

"You have to come with us right away." The guard gave him a hurry-along gesture with the gun.

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Max went at his own pace, neither hurrying nor dragging his feet. As he passed through the door, they left it open, pointing him toward the main gate. He heard the crunch of footsteps in gravel behind him, and he drew in his breath, waiting for the gunshot in the back of his head, wondering how much he would feel before he died. The gate still lay in ruins, smashed by the fall of the tower in the hurricane, open to the desert.

"Go on," the guard said. Still standing well back. His voice shook, as if he were frightened.

"Go where?" Max asked.

"To them," the guard said.

Dawn spied over the horizon; its pale smear of light glinted on two government cars. Half a dozen elite troops in body armor, with heavy weapons, stared down the guards. The dark blots of troop carriers hovered overhead. A thin, scholarly man stepped out of the first ground car, stood there, hands behind his back. He had a gun in the holster at his waist.

"It's good to see you again, Nick," he said.

Nick? Who called him Nick? "Anatoly?"

He walked toward Max, stopped abruptly when he saw Max's face. "Yes, it's me."

So there had been another mole in Mallove's office after all.

One of the soldiers held open a door in the second car for a very old man who had wisps of white hair at his temples and a beard like a biblical patriarch. He stepped out too quickly and lost his balance, though he reached out and grabbed the door handle to steady himself before he fell. His military uniform was insignia-less. On his feet he wore fuzzy, pink bunny slippers.

He stared at Max with almost vacant eyes, then scratched his cheek with the backs of his fingernails. "Hi, Max." His voice was faint, as if barely any air remained in his lungs.

"What's going on here?" the minister shouted. The first light of the day reflected off his goggles. He stomped out of the gate, flanked by his guards. The bunkers were emptying, the whole camp coming to witness this new tableau. "If there's a problem here, I assure you I can deal with it."

He spoke over the tan-uniformed soldiers, who blocked his way, and tried to address the men in the cars.

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The camp guards and the deacons mobbed together behind him, guns in some hands, pipes in others. The ragged penitents, in their filthy orange uniforms, spread out to see what was happening, which made the guards and deacons nervous. The minister shouted at the soldiers, and the soldiers shouted at him to back off. Any second, a lot of people could die.

Max turned to Anatoly. "May I have your gun?"

Anatoly looked to the old man, who nodded approval, then drew it, flicked off the safety, and offered it to Max butt-first. Max sighed when he felt it in his hand. As he walked toward the gate, the minister was saying, "Look, if you want revenge on those pig-men, for the way they treated you — "

"Shut up," Max ordered in the tone of a man used to being obeyed.

The minister's mouth clamped shut. His eyes revealed nothing behind the dusty goggles, but he tried to look past Max to the cars for an answer.

The guards and deacons began to back away, feet scuffling over the sand and stone.

"Stop!" Max ordered.

They stopped. A breeze passed through the camp, carrying the scent of the dead along with the smell of the sea and the promise of another hell-hot day. It rattled the Bible verse sign that had greeted Max on his arrival to the camp.

"Max, we're friends, right? I tried to help you, right?"

Vasily stepped forward from the mob, one hand up in surrender, the other still clutching the metal club.

"Get me out with you, Max," he said. "I did my best to help you. I was just doing what I had to do — "

"Shut up, Vasily."

"I don't have anything to do with politics — "

Max pointed the gun at Vasily's face. "Shut up! We're all prisoners to our politics. We make our choices, and we have to accept the direction those choices take us."

Vasily covered his face and shut his eyes.

"I don't know who you are, I couldn't know," the minister said. "But I'll make it right. If you want to kill that deacon, go ahead. He's a worthless — "

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Max moved his arm sideways until the barrel tapped the minister's goggles.

He pulled the trigger.

The minister's head snapped backward, body flung to the ground. The tan-uniformed soldiers lunged forward with their weapons, shouting at the camp guards to stand down. A metal pipe thudded into the ground, followed by the clatter of the others. A second later, the guards' guns rattled on the stony soil as they too were dropped.

Max went back to the cars. "Thank you, general," he said. "Nice slippers."

"They're a gift from Isabelle, my granddaughter, Anna's girl." His voice was raspy, his word punctuated with long pauses. "Max, my feet, they're always cold these days. These slippers don't keep them that much warmer, but maybe a little bit. A little girl's love, that's what it is. She's a good girl, likes chocolate too much, but I still give her chocolate." He paused for a second, looked off as if he was trying to remember something. "Meredith is worried sick about you, Max. Some kind of phone call you left her? She wouldn't leave me alone, kept after me and after me, over a month, until I promised to come find you."

A knot formed in Max's throat. "That sounds like her."

Drozhin turned his body half away from Max, scowled, scratching at his beard. "See, I didn't understand. I kept telling her you were safe. I'd thought I'd set it up that you were away in deep space. Safe, far away, during the purge. Keeping an eye on that bastard Lukinov for me."

"The mission got canceled," Max said. "Lukinov was killed."

The eyes fired, suddenly present. "You killed Lukinov?"

"Yes, I did."

"Good!" He paused. "No, wait, we were using him to feed false information to — no, wait, Mallove's dead now too."

"Right."

"Good." Drozhin lifted one bunny slipper to rub the back of his ankle and lost his balance again. Max reached out to catch him, and special forces men suddenly appeared in front of him. He realized he was still holding the gun.

Drozhin steadied himself by holding onto the door. "I want to go home. Is there anything else to do here, Max? There are flyers in the air.

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We can burn the place to the ground, erase it, kill everyone. Just say the word."

"Thank you, General. I know what I want to do."

He turned to the guards and deacons, aimed the gun at them, then pointed it south.

"Faraway is, well, it's very far away," he shouted. "But Camp Forty-three is only fifty kilometers north. You've got an hour's headstart before we come for you. That's the best you're going to get from me."

Vasily sprinted away instantly; the others followed a second later. Soon, only the penitents were left standing there, confused, their lines broken.

Drozhin sat down on the edge of his seat. "Max, just tell Anatoly who should die. We'll kill them all. Come see me next week. I'll have Anna make peanut butter cookies."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." As the door closed, Max walked over to the second car and handed the gun back to Anatoly. "I owe you a bullet."

"Consider it a gift," he said, holding the door open for Max. "Can you sit and talk for a minute?"

"Yes." They climbed into the car and sat across from each other. Max said, "So Drozhin still hates to fly."

"Still hates it. He was going to visit every camp personally until he found you."

"I'm glad I got off at the first stop."

Anatoly pulled the door shut. "You know you nearly got me killed outside Mallove's office?"

Max stared through the tinted window at the camp. "What?"

"Mallove's car was sent by Intelligence. It was a setup. We were supposed to climb in back and be whisked away to safety while Mallove was killed."

"Ah. That would have been much simpler. I'm sorry."

"No, you had no way of knowing. Frankly, I was amazed by your recognition and action. I just wanted to tell you, so you wouldn't think you'd been forgotten. You moved so quickly, it was damn hard to find you once we started looking. When Obermeyer checked some old dropboxes and found your note, that finally narrowed our search in the right direction."

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"Ah."

Anatoly covered his nose and mouth, sighing, as if he was embarrassed by what he had to say. "Can I ask you a favor?"

"I stink, don't I?"

"Like a corpse. That was your nickname, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Max hit the button to roll down the window. The world outside went from a smoky blur to a landscape awash with clarity and light. The Adareans at the gate gathered the dropped weapons while the other prisoners hung back, afraid. The sky spread out behind them, blue-green like the sea.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"You must set the Adareans free. You must send them back to their families."

Anatoly's face went blank and he didn't answer.

"Drozhin said anything I wanted — that's what I want."

Anatoly took off his glasses and polished them with a fold of his shirt. "We can do that. We'll blame their imprisonment on Mallove. And Education. Say that's how we knew he was out of control and had to be stopped."

Max nodded.

After a moment's pause, Anatoly cleared his throat. "Do you really want to go after the guards?"

"No," Max said. He rapped a knuckle on the window and gestured for the driver to follow Drozhin's car. Kilometers of empty land stretched out ahead of them: for a moment, Max imagined it a garden, like the cemetery in the capitol, filled with flowers remembering all those who died to terraform the planet. "There's been enough killing."

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Scott Dalrymple made his debut as a fiction writer just last month with "Enfant Terrible." He returns with fare that's a bit lighter in tone...

An Open Letter to Earth

By Scott Dalrymple

FIRST OFF, ALLOW US TO apologize for the abductions.

Although it seemed like a good idea at the time, we recognize that too often you did not find the experience as satisfying as we did. We genuinely regret the way things got out of hand.

It started out as just something to do, an occasional way to blow off steam after a long day of observation. We tried not to break anybody, and we always put you back where we found you. Frankly you aren't all that interesting, and we might soon have grown tired of the whole thing.

But we got such a kick out of your cute eyewitness accounts, what with the stories of our big dark eyes and little arms and all. You made us feel special, even if your tales were complete crap. The books, the movies, the T-shirts — we were like celebrities. And some of you took it all so seriously, with your conspiracy theories and everything. It was really quite a hoot.

Then this guy Whitley Strieber came along, and he sort of took the joy out of it, you know? What a killjoy shitbag he is. Today we abduct only

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nerdy guys who live alone in Airstream trailers, primarily because they're nerds and, truth be told, we just like to mess with their heads.

Many of you have written asking about crop circles, so let's set the record straight.

It ain't us. Really, it's not. Think about it. You people have trouble reaching your own moon, and even you have cell phones, satellite TV, and high-speed DSL.

We sail between stars at speeds you believe impossible — you think we have to knock down veggies in order to communicate?

And why do you always assume we land in rural areas? Please. On a planet with New York, Rio de Janeiro, Paris, and Amsterdam, you figure we'd choose to hang out in Roswell, New Mexico? Have any of you actually been there? (By the way, Area 51 is a real hole. In the unlikely event we're ever in the neighborhood again, we're staying someplace else for sure.)

We would be remiss if we failed to mention the anal probing. For the longest time, we swear we thought those were data ports. We meant no harm, and hope that you will, like us, try to forget this unfortunate chapter in our history. In retrospect it was simply a bad idea.

Now we don't want to be seen as whiners, but there are a few things we wish to discuss.

For one thing, we are troubled by the way we have been portrayed in the media. We represent an array of life whose richness and sheer scope would astound you. Yet for the most part, on this planet we are typecast as either hairless dweebs with foreheads like watermelons, or else giant insects who want to eat you.

No offense, but this is especially hard to take from a backwater planet most beings have never heard of. (In fairness, this is not entirely true. Earth is generally known for one thing: cottage cheese. Seriously, nobody else ever thought of that. Not even the Loboölata, who are themselves dairy products.)

The very word "alien" is plagued by negative associations. According to our latest focus groups, the term conjures up images of 1) slimy, parasitic creatures who spring onto the faces of unsuspecting beings in order to plant their young inside, or 2) people picking cabbages. (Apologies to the Bulibians: slimy, parasitic creatures who actually do spring onto the faces of unsuspecting beings in order to plant their young inside.)

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We've discussed this among ourselves, and we no longer wish to be called aliens. Henceforth, we prefer to be called "Chuck Norris®." Please do not shorten, hyphenate, or alter this in any way. The plural form is the same, as in, "Hey, there goes a Chuck Norris®. Wait, there goes another one."

Finally, some advice.

Look, from where we sit, you're all the same. We appreciate that human beings come in slightly different models and colors, and to you these nearly imperceptible differences seem to cause no end of trouble. But honestly, we're astounded that you can even tell yourselves apart. In blind taste tests, in fact, the average Chuck Norris® cannot detect any difference whatsoever. So chill, people of Earth, and try to get along.

While you're in a reflective mood, take a closer look at what you're doing to your planet. You are ruining it: depleting your natural resources, polluting your air, sickening your oceans, and destroying unique species forever. This is just plain wrong, not to mention completely irrational. Everyone knows that the logical thing is to find somebody else's planet and ruin *that*. Noobs. How can you possibly expect to survive in the coming interstellar economy?

By the way, we've elected you to come up with the new shared unit of galactic currency. Just pick something small and ubiquitous, something of nominal value that you won't miss much. It's your call, but we suggest hamsters.

In closing, much of what you do befuddles us. Many of your core concepts — such as guilt, selflessness, and David Hasselhoff — simply have no counterparts in non-Terran cultures. You're what galactic sociologists call "a bunch of strange ducks."

Yet for reasons not entirely clear, we have developed a certain affection for you. We'd just as soon keep you around, if only for the entertainment value.

We're going away for a bit now, and when we return, we expect to find that you have made significant progress toward sitting at the adults' table. This will, of course, mean fewer senseless military conflicts, less reality television, and no more Sudoku.

Don't make us come down there.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

NOT WITH A BANG, BUT WITH THE SEX PISTOLS

ACCORDING to a consensus of the world's filmmakers, our future is a *fait accompli*. We will be ravaged by a deadly virus; billions will die or become the living dead; cities will be quarantined and the survivors will revert to barbarism; a powerful clique within the government will seize power; a man or woman with great martial skill and a highly individual moral code will be sent into the quarantined zone to recover some vital information or object, and during the course of this mission, he or she will discover something that will prove that the government was responsible for the plague or has some otherwise significant culpability. There are variations on the theme, but that's the essential end-of-the-world scenario, one that far outstrips the second-place entry, i.e., death by killer asteroid or meteorite, which endured a brief millennial vogue.

It's a reasonable scenario, actually — the elements for a pandemic are all in place — but the prescience of these contemporary John Carpenters and George Millers is somewhat muted for me by the furnishings of their films. Why is it, I find myself wondering, that '80s punk fashions should so abound in the post-apocalyptic futures conjured by these visionaries? *Escape From New York* and *The Road Warrior* were both released in 1981, during the flourishing of the punk aesthetic, so a reliance on the imagery of the day is understandable; but it would seem the many reimaginings of their seminal vision filmed since that time might mine some other depth for barbarian accessories. Perhaps the directors of these films are merely committing the sin of *homage*, or it may be that the fund of

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imagination responsible for such pictures has gone bankrupt. I think it more likely that when they cast their minds ahead, these great men have foreseen that vast secret stores of hair products and make-up will be unearthed from beneath our dead cities, not to mention loads of '80s synth, music much beloved by the punkiest generation.

The most recent incarnation of this pop culture staple comes to us courtesy of Neil Marshall, who has previously given us two entertaining little horror films, *Dog Soldiers* and *The Descent*. Despite the chops Marshall displayed in those films, it's hard to believe that he can return to form after a showing as abysmal as his latest, *Doomsday*, a mash-up of the sort one commonly sees on YouTube — such sudden downturns in quality usually reflect a drastic lowering of aspiration, a surrender to the realities of modern filmmaking. The movie opens promisingly enough, introducing us to spandex-clad commando, Major Eden Sinclair (Rhona Mitra), who is engaged in holding together the last vestiges of a decaying Britain. Thirty years earlier, an outbreak of the "deadly Reaper virus" (as opposed to the cuddly Reaper virus), in Glasgow of all places, caused Scotland to be quarantined behind a steel wall stretching eighty miles from the North Sea to the Irish Sea, protected by automated batteries that blow away anything (as Marshall gorily demonstrates) from the size of a bunny rabbit on up. I suspect Marshall's choice of a virulent Glasgow betrays some subtext — at least I know quite a few Scots who would welcome such a wall, though with the guns facing in the opposite direction. Be that as it may, in terms of the movie, all signs of human life disappeared from Scotland until 2032, when satellite imaging picked up activity on the streets of Glasgow. Now the virus, too, has resurfaced, this time in London, and the evil Canaris (a thuggish David O'Hara), the power behind the British Prime Minister, orders Bill Nelson (Bob Hoskins in Thankless Role 538 of his career) to assemble a team to go into Glasgow and find Martin Kane (Malcolm McDowell in Thankless Genre Role 327 of *his* career), a scientist who was working on a cure. Miller knows just where to go for a team leader: Eden Sinclair. As a child, she was thrust by her mum onto the last chopper out of Scotland and thus has a burning, churning urge to learn what happened. So off they go, the team, into the ghostly ruins of Glasgow, packed into a pair of

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Damnation Alley-style armored vehicles (there is scarcely a post-apocalyptic movie that Marshall doesn't "pay homage" to). Things are moving along rather nicely at this stage, a suitably dark atmosphere having been established, and I was settling in for what looked to be a decent B-picture (nothing original, yet done with a certain panache), when a force of Mohawk-sporting, S&M gear-wearing, cannibal gutter punks attack the team, overwhelm vehicles designed to resist rocket assaults with Molotov cocktails, capture Eden, and the movie veers into low comedy.

Derisive audience reaction (sniggers, guffaws, and the odd profane catcall) began in earnest when Sol (Craig Conway), the leader of the punks and, as it turns out, Kane's son, fronts his tribe in what appears to be a send-up of the stadium scene in *Escape From New York* (currently being remade for 2009, oh joy!), prancing about on a stage with dancers and leading a group singalong to "Good Thing" by Fine Young Cannibals, distributing paper plates to the mob in preparation for a feast, while one of Eden's team is flash-roasted and then served piping hot by Viper (Lee-Anne Liebenberg), Sol's consort, a tattooed young lady who seems to think that waggling her tongue Gene Simmons-style conveys her evil essence — whatever her intent, she waggles away whenever the opportunity arises. Sol, who specializes in yelling during moments of anger, frustration, and pretty much any old time, doing his best impression of Lord Humungus from *The Road Warrior*, yells aplenty when Eden breaks out of punk jail along with Cally (MyAnna Buring), Kane's daughter, whom Sol has imprisoned because ...well, just because. They make their escape by means of a train that's conveniently waiting at the station, ready to chug off into the countryside in search of Kane, here portrayed as the mad Steward of Gondor-Lite by McDowell. He's hanging out in a medieval castle, the head dingbat of a bunch of armor-wearing, bow-and-arrow-toting, sword swingers who eschew technology and resemble your local chapter of the SCA, participating in jousts, throwing roast beef up into the air and like that. This feudal schtick puts the punk ethos of Sol's rebellion into somewhat comprehensible perspective, but basically it serves to amp up the comedy, some of which may even be intentional.

By the time the survivors of Eden's team reach Kane's castle,

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there have been so many logical gaffes and plot holes that to list them would be overkill; however, two in particular deserve mention. First, we learn early on that the Scottish survivors have become cannibals because they have run out of food; yet the team has just entered Scotland when they run smack into an enormous herd of cattle. Secondly, before imprisoning the team, Kane, a blood scientist, tells them that their quest has been in vain, the virus is incurable, this despite the fact that he and his subjects are immune, and that his daughter is ultimately handed over to the evil Canaris government with the instruction that a cure can be distilled from her blood. The general slovenliness exemplified by these irrationalities makes it impossible to enjoy the film, even as an exercise in camp. There follows a pitfight before a howling audience between Eden and Telamon, a massive armored chap who caves like a sissy after a few karate kicks, thereby allowing Eden and her pals to flee into a mineshaft where she happens upon a brand-new Bentley in a box, with a full tank of gas and an activated cell phone.

No, seriously.

Pretty lucky, huh?

Off Eden and her team go again, only to be pursued by Sol and his band of neo-barbarians who appear out of nowhere in jalopies tarted up with skeletal remains and so forth — they may not look fast, but they're capable of outrunning Eden's ride, a fact that must distress executives of the Volkswagen Group, manufacturers of the Bentley. The ensuing chase scene is an almost note-perfect reprise of the climactic chase in *The Road Warrior*, with punks and punkettes alike suffering grisly, comic deaths...at least they were comic the first few times I saw them. In short, *Doomsday* should be avoided like the deadly Reaper virus.

Sticking with the end of the world as a theme, a better result (not for the world, but for the moviegoer) can be had by a viewing of *The Signal*, a low-budget filmic tryptich by a trio of Atlanta-based directors, David Bruckner, Jacob Gentry, and Dan Bush, each of whom tell part of a larger story. The first and most traditionally horrific, Bruckner's *Transmission 1: Crazy For Love*, follows an adulterous wife, Mya (Annessa Ramsey), home after a nooner with Ben (Justin Wellborn), where she finds her suspicious husband Lewis (AJ Bowen) watching a game on TV with some pals. Zzzzt. The picture goes haywire, resolving

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into a many-colored Rorschach blob. A minute later, someone is bludgeoned by a baseball bat and Mya flees her blood-splattered house only to discover that the world has been driven insane by a signal that comes through every TV, cell phone, and radio. People armed with guns and hedge clippers and whatever falls to hand are committing mayhem on one another ...albeit not mindlessly. The signal amplifies bloodlust and leaves its victims with sufficient mental capacity to deny or rationalize their guilt, a symptom that strikes me as very twenty-first century.

It's in Jacob Gentry's more comedic *Transmission 2: The Jealousy Monster* that the film really comes together. The episode opens with a wife sitting at the dinner table talking to her murdered husband. Several other people join her over the next half hour, including Lewis, who's searching for Mya, and the situation grows increasingly surreal — at one point, the group has a deadpan discussion about whether or not to kill someone knocking at the door; at another, a woman believes she is dancing with her husband, whose body lies a few feet away.

The last episode, *Escape From Terminus*, by Dan Bush, takes place after most of the citizens of Atlanta have been slaughtered, and covers events that occur after Ben and Lewis arrive at a bus station, both men hunting for Mya. It's hampered by having to tie all the narrative strands together, yet it maintains the movie's surreal edge and is highlighted by a conversation between one of the characters and a decapitated head. Though it's a bit uneven, *The Signal* employs its interlocking narrative with considerable deftness and the recurrence of characters in one another's stories seems entirely natural.

Sometime this summer or this fall, a little movie called *Paranormal Activity* will sneak into your town, play for a few days or a week, and then be gone without much fanfare. After *Cloverfield*, I thought I was done with the Blair Witch mode of home video "documentary" filmmaking. I was wrong. First-time director Oren Peli has taken the form and, working with basically a two-character cast and from a completely improvised script, has fashioned a terrifying ghost story that left me exhausted and unsettled for a couple of days after watching it. Much credit must be given to the actors, Micah Sloat and Katie Featherston. They play a young couple who have just moved

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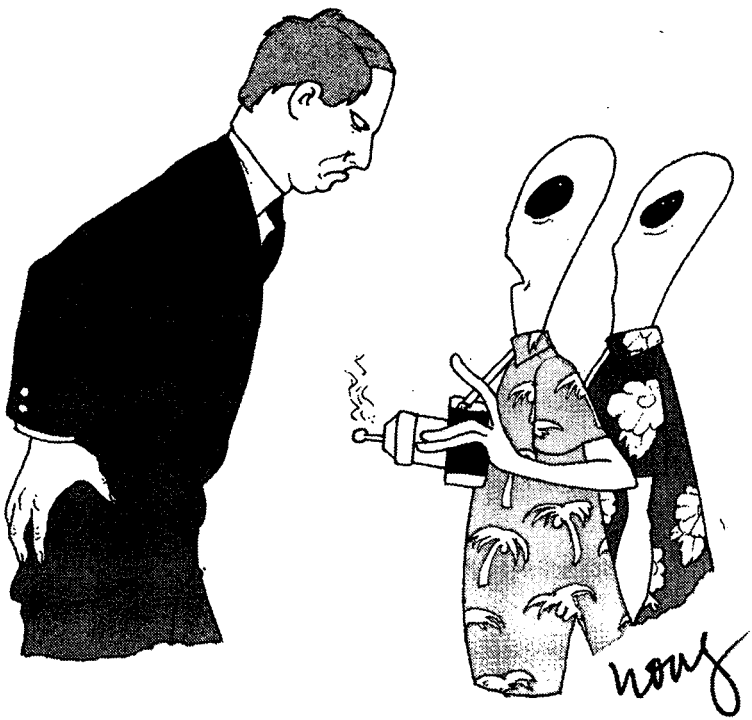
in together—Katie has felt haunted by an indefinite presence her entire life and, half playfully, Micah decides to record their nights when they are asleep. Katie begs him not to disturb the entity, but Micah's ego won't let him hear her, and so it begins. I'm not going to tell you any more about the movie, except to say it makes *The Blair Witch* seem about as scary as a day-old sandwich and, though it's always hard to guess what will scare people, I'd wager you won't make it through this one without experiencing major anxiety. The picture's paced so well, the actors are so persuasive.... Put simply, *Paranormal Activity* revitalizes a worn-out scenario, gives it a canny new edge, and succeeds in adding to the canon of horror cinema. ☙



"Of course it's an anal probe. What else would it be?"

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Poke around a bit at www.stevenpopkes.com *and you'll find out that Mr. Popkes is originally from Southern California, has degrees in Zoology and Neurophysiology, is currently working for NASA on the Ares project, and has a side interest in hot air engines. What you won't find on the site is any indication of whether the life of Mr. Popkes has been influenced in the way Sam's life was changed in this work of fiction.*

Another Perfect Day

By Steven Popkes

SAM PROKOFIEV WOKE UP with the sun. For a moment, he watched the light grow across the ceiling. Golden. He could imagine it shining first over the Atlantic, then up across the fine Florida sand to the old Hollywood Beach Hotel, lingering over the pink stucco and then flashing down Hollywood Boulevard into his window. The palm trees rustled, faintly. He could hear the gulls. It was too early for the cars.

Another perfect day in paradise.

He took a shower, shaved, walked past the small grand piano, drawing his fingers over the top, past the closed door of Lina's room, to the kitchen.

After breakfast he looked at today's entry in the date book. It was a habit Lina had instilled in him when they first met, back when she was still Joe's secretary. Lina had died three years ago, but after he had tracked gigs, practice sessions, dates with different girls, payment dates from managers, dates with one girl, payment dates to pawn shops, an engagement date, a marriage date, birthdays, vacations, anniversaries, doctor's appointments, prescription refills, medication schedules and finally

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funeral arrangements, he wasn't about to give it up. He had a drawer full of these little date books, each as neatly labeled as notes on a staff.

Cleaning the pistol was first. Then, it was gardening in the back yard and an afternoon of fishing. All things he liked. Damn. It was first of the month again. Penciled in at the bottom of the page was the single word "compose." Once a month, he stared at the keys to see if something would come to him. Just like he promised Lina.

He sighed and got up from the table, pulled out the pistol box from the sideboard and took his cup of coffee to the patio outside. He sat down and opened the box, pulled out the heavy .38, and set it in his lap. He pulled out the other items from the box: cleaning solvent, wiping rags, the box of ammunition —

A huge, fat man jumped the fence and ran pounding across Sam's garden, screaming "Don't do it! Don't do it!" Before Sam could react, he yanked the pistol off his lap and stood, obese and wheezing, ten feet away.

Sam stared at him. The young man was grossly heavy — maybe three hundred pounds — pale, wearing shorts and a light shirt. Over the shirt he was wearing a harness with various boxes and meters. He tried to speak but couldn't catch his breath.

Sam brought over a chair and eased him down into it. The chair creaked ominously but didn't break.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll be — " He stopped to pant for a moment. " — okay in a minute. Asthma."

"I see." Sam sat back in the other chair. He felt a little nonplused. "What am I not supposed to do?"

"Shoot — yourself."

"Ah. Do you have a name?"

"Wilson." Wilson's breathing gradually came under control. "Wilson Taylor."

"Well, Wilson," began Sam. "I wasn't planning to shoot myself. I was cleaning the pistol. I do it every month."

"You were going to shoot yourself over the death of your wife." Wilson seemed able to breathe without difficulty now. "She died last year. I came to save you."

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"Are you sure you have the right house?" asked Sam hopefully. "I'm Sam Prokofiev."

"You're Sergei Prokofiev. Born in the Ukraine in 1891. Spent a lot of time traveling and composing before settling in Moscow in 1929. Met and married Mira Mendelssohn. Favorite composer of Stalin until the guy died in 1942. Khrushchev didn't like you so you and Mira emigrated from Russia to the United States in 1939, just before World War II. Mira contracted cancer in 1944 and died a year later. You killed yourself out of grief today, March 15, 1945." Wilson looked at Sam with triumph. "Except you didn't. I saved you."

Sam stared at him. "World War...Two?"

"Well, yeah. It's not like you could have left Russia after the war started."

"Of course," Sam said, recovering himself. "Thank you." The phone was inside. Maybe Sam could get to it without drawing attention to himself. "Would you like a glass of lemonade?"

Wilson frowned. "You said you weren't going to kill yourself."

"Maybe I was about to."

"Maybe it was murder, then. Many conspiracy theorists have thought you were never the type to commit suicide. They insist you were assassinated by the MKVD."

"My very thoughts."

Wilson looked around the yard. "This isn't Queens."

"Are you sure?"

Wilson ignored him. "You don't see palm trees in Queens."

Sam gave up. "No, you don't."

Wilson thought for a moment. "I must have overshot. Quick, man. What's the date? I could still reach him."

"February 1, 1947."

Wilson fell silent for a moment and stared at the ground. Sam stood up. "I'll get some lemonade."

"Where is this? California?"

"Hollywood, anyway. Hollywood, Florida."

"He's already dead. What am I going to do?" Wilson buried his head in his hands.

Sam patted his shoulder sympathetically and deftly snagged the gun

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as he went inside. He locked it in a drawer in the bedroom and then returned to the kitchen. He found Wilson frantically searching the room.

"I hid the gun," Sam said softly.

"I need a pad of paper. And a pencil. It must have been the Uncertainty Principle." Wilson stared up at him. "Do you think it was the Uncertainty Principle?"

"I'm certain of it." Sam found a pad and pencil and gave it to Wilson.

Wilson sat at the table. "You said lemonade?"

Sam pulled the pitcher out of the refrigerator and poured for both of them. He looked at Wilson's pudgy hands and unfocussed eyes. This boy wasn't dangerous. Hell, when Sam and Strav were playing gigs up in New York they dealt with much worse than this.

Wilson looked up suddenly. "What were you doing in Florida with a gun in 1947?"

"Son, North Miami is three blocks south of here. Of course I've got a gun."

"Was North Miami that bad in 1947?"

"It's been bad ever since the Dominican Republic fell under the control of Haiti. Every refugee refused entry by Batista ends up here."

Wilson seemed nonplused. "I guess I don't know much Florida history." He went back to scrabbling on the paper. He stopped again. "I didn't know you were in Florida."

Sam sat down across from him. "I was born in 1891. But everything else you said about me was wrong. I studied in the Saint Petersburg Conservatory until 1921 when the revolution closed it down. I composed and gave concerts until things went to hell after Trotsky followed Lenin. I fled first to Paris and then to America. I played jazz clubs and bet at the racetrack and bluffed at poker and met and married Carolina Codina — she sang under the name, Lina Llubera. This is the house I bought her. She loved living somewhere warm all year long. Lina got sick five years ago and died three years ago. Now I live here by myself. So: I'm not who you think I am."

Wilson stared at him, his face heavy. He turned back to his pad of paper.

Sam leaned back. He could use another cup of coffee. Wilson made him feel tired.

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"Okay, then," Wilson said, his lips pursed. He stared at the pad of paper. "I'm from the future. I invented a time machine to come back and save you from suicide. Except this isn't where I aimed and you aren't him."

"That's a time machine?" Sam pointed at the harness.

"Wormhole generator, anyway. You trigger the wormhole and it takes you back in time."

Sam could see now the dials. "Looks like date and time. Latitude and longitude?"

"Yeah," admitted Wilson. "But those aren't the controls I used. I used this part." He pointed at a slim device plugged into a socket on the side of the bigger box on his chest. "This finds you — Sergei Prokofiev — and determines your closest chronological point to me. Which I figured was when you died. That would be the latest point in your life and therefore closest to me. But, clearly it doesn't work." Wilson turned back to the pad and paper. "It's a proof of the many worlds hypothesis, anyway."

"It doesn't look complicated enough to be a time machine. It's just a set of numbers, a couple of dials and a big red button."

"Why make everything complicated? The computer does all the work. It figures out the best path, makes sure I don't end up inside a wall."

"Computer?"

Wilson shrugged. "Never mind."

"What's the big red button?"

"Automatic return. But it's only good for a few hours. Then, I have to dial in my return. Safety factor in case I got hurt." He returned to his figures.

"Was I famous where you come from?" Sam asked after a few moments.

"Absolutely." Wilson looked up. "Everybody thinks about you the same way they think about Mozart: cut down in the prime of life. Who knows what you might have produced?"

"I would have been fifty-six. Hardly the prime of life."

"You never know." Wilson shrugged. "All right, I thought you were cut down in the prime of your life. The first piece of music I ever heard in my whole life that I actually liked was Suite for Three Oranges. And the

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scraps you left of Ode on the End of the War are really, really good. I wanted to hear the rest."

"You're a sweet boy."

Wilson stared at the pad. "That's not what most people say."

"What do they say?"

"That I'm crazy."

Sam looked over. Wilson was writing some kind of equations. Sam noticed the thickness of his arms. The strength in his fingers. Suddenly, he felt old and vulnerable.

"Care for another lemonade?"

"That would be great."

Sam took his glass, filled it and set it down next to him. Wilson gulped it down, starting to sweat. "Is it always this hot?"

"It's Florida."

"I guess." Wilson looked up at Sam. "I could have come using lat, longs and time. But I didn't think that was precise enough. I could miss your death. You could be out shopping. Walking the dog."

"I don't have a dog."

"Instead, I zeroed in on distance."

"Distance?"

"It's a complex function — I call it distance. I wanted to find the closest approximate chronological point from me, in the present, to you, in the past. Then, I'd be close to you near the moment of your death." Wilson threw up his hands. "I have no idea how this happened. Instead of California, I get Florida. Instead of Prokofiev wracked with grief over the death of his beloved Mira, I get you, pretty much over the death of Lina."

"Not completely over," Sam commented dryly.

"And instead of 1945 I get 1947!"

"It'll come to you." Sam tried to sound soothing.

"I guess." Then, Wilson held the pencil in the air and looked at it carefully. Then, he gently put it down on the table. He put his arms on the table next to it and slowly eased his great head down on them.

"Wilson?" called Sam. "Wil-son?"

Wilson didn't move.

Sam nodded to himself. He stood up and returned to the kitchen. He replaced the bottle of chloral hydrate back in the cupboard. Sam wasn't

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surprised it had taken two glasses. Wilson was a big man and Sam had been careful with the dosage.

Wilson began to snore. Sam patted his shoulder. He hadn't lost his touch. This was the way he and Strav had rolled sailors and queers back when that was the only way to make a gig pay. Of course he had chloral hydrate.

Sam wrestled the harness off of Wilson so he could handle him. Wilson was too heavy to get to the floor — the safest place for an unconscious person. Sam made sure Wilson's head was turned so that if the boy vomited in his sleep, it wouldn't choke him to death. He never wanted to relive that moment again. Sam shivered.

Holding the harness, Sam picked up the phone to call the police. The phone in his hand, he held the harness up and scrutinized it. The controls were clearly visible and looked just as simple as Wilson had described them. Sam put down the phone. He stared at the harness a long time.

WILSON SNORTED in his sleep and suddenly sat up. "It's the Pauli Exclusion Principle!"

Sam, sitting across from him, sipped his coffee. "Beg pardon?"

"The Pauli Exclusion Principle says that no two electrons in an atom can have the same quantum number." He shaped something vaguely spherical in the air with his hands. Sam presumed it was an atom. Or maybe it was a quantum number. Or both.

Wilson stared at him for a moment. "Forget about that. What happens if I go into the past and change it: I change my present — possibly enough to prevent me from going into the past in the first place. Therefore, my Prokofiev isn't the closest Prokofiev at all. It's the only Prokofiev that's, in fact, infinitely far away. I can never reach him. I can only find Prokofievs that can't paradox me."

His voice fell and he looked at the table. "Maybe 'nearness' can only be determined by the Prokofiev least similar to mine rather than the most similar." He shook his head. "There's no reason that the different realities have to be in any kind of lockstep with regard to time. Maybe I've got it all wrong and time travel isn't possible. Maybe there isn't any such thing as past at all — just alternate realities that are close enough to one another

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that one could resemble the past of another." He held up both his hands. "You can't have time travel. You can only have a simulation of time travel." Wilson looked at Sam desperately. "What do you think?"

"I think there's definitely such a thing as a past."

Wilson nodded absently. "Man, my head hurts." He sat up and looked around, shook his head. "My neck is stiff. And I'm really thirsty. How long was I asleep?"

"Almost twenty-four hours."

"Really?" Wilson rubbed his face. "I'm not hungry. Usually, I'm really hungry in the morning. Do you have any more lemonade?"

"Apple juice."

"That'll do."

Sam brought the bottle and glass and passed them over to Wilson.

"Wow," Wilson said wonderingly. "Time — alternate world — travel really takes it out of you."

Sam picked up an envelope he'd placed on the floor next to his chair. He passed it over the table to Wilson.

Wilson picked it up. "What's this?"

"A present. For not letting me kill myself."

"Aw, man." Wilson grinned at him. He opened the envelope and pulled out the paper. "This is music." He squinted at the title. "This is Ode on the End of the War." Slowly, he put it down. "You died before you could finish it."

"I'm not dead, Wilson."

"But you're not him."

Sam traced the pattern of the wood in the table. His hands ached. They were still swollen from the night before. "I'm a composer, too. Maybe it will be close enough."

"This is handwritten, man." Wilson carefully slid the music back in the envelope. "Did you do it while I was asleep?"

"Yes. I thought you should have something for coming."

Wilson held the envelope reverently. "Thanks. Thanks a lot, man." He sipped his juice. "Man, I dreamed of this moment for years. When I could talk to Prokofiev face to face." He laughed shortly. "But now that I'm here, I can't think of a thing to say."

"I'm not your Prokofiev."

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"You're as close as I'm ever going to get."

"Fair enough." Sam watched the obsessed young man thoughtfully. "How about you tell me about who I am in your world and I'll tell you about who I am here while I cook breakfast. Do you like eggs?"

Wilson's expression grew serious. "Man, I love eggs."

It was late morning when Wilson leaned back from the table. He stood up and stretched. "I better be getting back." He picked up the harness from the sofa and put it on.

Sam stood up. "I'm glad you came, Wilson."

"Me, too." Wilson held out his hand to shake good-bye. Sam took it.

"Thanks, man," Wilson said. "Thanks for everything."

Wilson fastened the harness and started the machine.

"Don't forget to dial it in," Sam said. "You said the return button would only work for a few hours."

Wilson nodded. "Right." He adjusted the controls on the harness. The lights glowed and the dials jumped. The fans in the back whirred. "Stand back," he said.

Wilson waved as he flicked the switch.

His hair seemed to wave in the static electricity. There was the smell of ozone and a pop — he was gone.

Sam cleaned up the plates, the bottle of apple juice, and the glasses and put them in the sink. Then, he went to the closet and brought out a pile of books. Each one was labeled The Complete Works of Sergei Prokofiev, 1891-1953. There were twelve fat volumes of scores, commentary, and analysis.

Sam pulled out the volume containing the completed Ode and took it to the piano. He went through parts of it again. Just as it had the night before, playing this piece felt exactly like playing something he had composed but had never seen before. It wasn't quite what he would have written, but it was something he could have written. He could see ideas, variations — suggestions of different works.

He could milk just this collection for years, dribbling it out, publishing here, performing there. It could be a career in itself. But he didn't have to. As he had found last night while he was copying out Ode, this was like having an interesting conversation with somebody he knew very well: what was coming out was completely his, inspired by something he'd

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never done. Sam wondered how many more of him were out there. All of them similar in one way or another — or maybe there was only one of him but with a thousand faces.

After an hour, his hands were finally too swollen and painful to hold even a pencil. He went to the sink and ran cold water over them until the pain lessened. He picked up the phone and called a familiar number.

"Joe?" he said into the phone. Listened for a moment. "Yeah, it's me. Back from the grave and ready to party." Pause. "Heart attacks are badges of honor in your business, aren't they? You don't have a Soviet Empire but agents have an empire all their own."

"Never mind," he said after a moment. "Just a joke."

Sam looked at the clock. It was after noon. He poured himself a highball. "I've been working. Yeah. Three years' worth. Want to start something up?" The first taste of a highball is the best, he thought. Like the first notes of a concerto. Like the first hints of a fresh start. Here's to you, Lina, he thought. And to you, Wilson. You would have liked each other.

Of course Joe wanted in. They started bouncing ideas off of one another.

Sam leaned against the counter as he listened. The sun made all the bright colors of the flowers and the bees stand out. He could smell the fragrances as they drifted in.

Another perfect day in paradise.

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Rand Lee contributed "Litany" to our June issue. He returns now with a very different sort of tale, a short piece that cuts like a brand-new knife.

Bounty

By Rand B. Lee

THEY CAUGHT HIM UP NEAR the reservoir, where the wooded hills bunched like shoulders around the old cracked concrete of the retaining walls. He was as strong as they had feared, so it took all four of them to hold him down; and then unctuous Binny, clumsy with self-importance, fumbled the stunner and shocked himself all to hell while the one they'd been hunting bucked and heaved like a bull gone crazy. "Enough of *this* crap," said cool Albert, nose-blood tracking down his parka, so he kicked the guy in the balls with his big boot and again when that just seemed to make him madder. Albert picked the stunner out of Binny's limp hand and applied it to their quarry where it would do the most good. There was a snap and a flash, and the smell of meat frying, and a scream like nothing any of them had ever heard, then nothing. "Presto," said Albert. "We have bagged ourself a perv. Get up, dumb wad." This last was to the perpetually scowling Drew, whom their quarry had managed to shake loose in his final convulsion. "You still have your cell or did you lose it when you crapped your pants just now?"

"Frog you, Albert." Drew's hands, gloved in the cold like all their

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hands, were shaking slightly. Ralph was closest. "Is he alive?" Ralph peered; looked up again and nodded. Drew retrieved his cell phone from the bush where it had landed and dialed the number. "We have him," he said to the person who answered on the other end of the line, and hung up. He clipped the phone to his belt again and looked up to see all his friends' eyes on him. "What?" he snapped.

"The money," said big Ralph, still panting from exertion. It was he who had done most of the work in immobilizing their quarry while he had fought to evade the stun. "When do we get our money?"

"On delivery, what do you think?" Binny was groaning. The left side of his face was coming up in a mass of bruises from where he had banged it during his convulsions on the hard ground. He sat up, blubbering, saying, "Oh God, oh God," over and over.

Drew went over to him. "Come on, man, get it together."

"Did we get him?"

"We got him, Bin."

"No thanks to you, dumb wad," said Albert. With Drew's encouragement (though the boys were careful not to touch, always careful not to touch, not to help by touching, never ever) Binny got up and made his shaky way to where their downed prey lay unmoving, pale and a bit shrunken in a stink of relaxed bowels. Binny stood unsteadily, staring down at the man, then seemed to sway, and Ralph said, "Here it comes," and Binny heaved, and out spewed the lovely pancakes and sausages nice Mrs. Halvorsen had treated them to that morning before they had left for the chase. "Sorry. Sorry," Binny mumbled, and did it again. "Oh, *man*," said Ralph. Ralph got up and stepped around their downed quarry and strode past Albert and Drew toward the trail. As he went by, Drew heard him say, "All I want is my money." A moment after he had disappeared into the woods, he reappeared again and called, "Well, is somebody going to help me with the stretcher or not?"

"Be right there," said Binny weakly. He made no move to follow. Drew did not feel nauseated, only very light-headed, as though his skull were a balloon that a slender tether was keeping fastened to his neck and shoulders. "I'll go," he said. "Stay put, Bin." Bin nodded gratitude but would not look him in the eye. He said to Albert, "Leave him alone," and followed Ralph down the trail.

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Out of sight of Albert and the body, he began to breathe deeply, aware suddenly of the leaves of the sugar maples in flames all around him, and the sunbeams shafting the forest litter like searchlights. Bird song, stilled by their crashing through the underbrush and the melée that had followed, now rose and spattered about him. He realized that if he were not careful, he would begin to weep from adrenaline release, and this he refused to do, not with Albert around to hear, and see with his ferret eyes. He got to the clearing where the truck was. Ralph was leaning against the chassis, his big shoulders hunched in misery, his gray face hunched over a cupped cigarette. He looked up when he heard Drew, tried to hide the cigarette, stopped. "Don't tell," he said. Drew snorted, dismissing it.

They stood together, together but not touching, looking out over the clearing, Drew remembering the wild ride up the mountain, their quarry's strong legs pumping prison pale in the sumac, all four of them screaming, excited, like birds of prey. "It was fair," said Ralph suddenly, exhaling smoke. He squinted at Drew uncertainly. "A fair chase. Wasn't it? I mean, no dogs or guns. Right? He had his chance and God gave us the victory, right?"

"That's right," said Drew.

"I mean, it was all legal and righteous and aboveboard, right? With the national anti-perv law and everything?"

"Yeah."

"Too bad the other one got away, huh? His friend? It would of meant double the bounty, wouldn't it?"

"Yes."

"Boy, he really kept Albert going, this one," said Ralph desperately, voice loud. "Didn't he? Albert, our mighty expert tracker!" He took the cigarette out of his mouth and spat in the leaves. He sounded almost admiring as he added, "All that ducking and weaving and drawing us off so his bud could get away? Man, Old Albert was crazier than a peach orchard boar. And that perv. He was sure strong, hey! Wasn't he?"

"Crazy's the word." He saw Albert's face, purple with rage, and realized they would have to get back soon; it was too dangerous, this camaraderie, this moment of peace between the two of them. But before

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he could suggest it, Ralph turned to face him, his big neck corded, all triumph fled.

"I mean," said Ralph desperately, and this time Drew wondered if he would say what he really did mean, "I never saw one before, you know? You hear about the — the pervs, how they're the lowest of the low, even though we're all sinners saved by grace, like?" He took another drag on his cigarette; exhaled. "I just didn't expect — that sound." Drew said nothing. After a while the big boy put out his cigarette on the side of his truck, then pocketed the remainder. Silently they slung the stretcher between them and walked back up the trail to the reservoir where the Devil and his henchman were waiting.

Coming Attractions

Next month we'll be under the sea, but don't look for any octopus's gardens in Carolyn Ives Gilman's "Arkfall." This novella takes us to the planet Ben, where humans are living underwater as they make the planet habitable, and an offworlder finds that he doesn't fit in as well as he'd hoped.

We also expect to bring you a dark vision of the future in "Pump Six," Paolo Bacigalupi's depiction of what might come to be If This Goes On.

The lineup for our annual anniversary issue isn't finalized yet, but we're looking at new stories by Terry Bisson, Stephen King, M. Rickert, Geoff Ryman, Michael Swanwick, Steve Utley, and Kate Wilhelm. Our cup runneth over. We're also working on making our sixtieth anniversary year a special one, so go to *www.fandsf.com* and subscribe now to ensure that you'll receive every great issue.

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Richard Mueller says he is a starving writer in Los Angeles when he isn't on strike or otherwise fomenting political discord at the local coffeehouse, where he drinks iced tea.

"But Wait! There's More!"

By Richard Mueller

WHEN IT CAME TO PLANNING ahead, Cullin McSherry was not the brightest bulb on the marquee. He had drifted through life on creativity and instinct, laboring in the electric vineyards of television, living the life of a freelancer, writing for sitcoms and episodic dramas. And, since he was a prompt and proficient screenwriter, he was respected — which meant that he was hired when there was work but forgotten or ignored when there wasn't. It was an any-landing-you-can-walk-away-from existence, which suited his personality well. Or it would have been had it not been for the fact that Cullin McSherry was married.

Cullin's wife, Terry Olin McSherry, hated her rhyming name, which she never used except when reminding her husband how much she detested it — which she did nearly every day. "I should never have married you, a man with a name like that."

"Well, call yourself Teresa."

"I'm Terry! I've always been Terry."

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"As I recall, nobody twisted your arm. You didn't have to say yes." And on and on for four years.

When he was writing well and productively, she backed off her criticism and condescended to be the wife of a successful scribe, but during slack times she blamed him for every possible economic bump and pothole in her life. What made it all the worse was that Terry Olin (McSherry) was an actress.

"You would think," Cullin said on occasion, "that as a fellow show business professional you would have a bit of empathy for the vagaries of that business. That you would understand how difficult it is to make a living in this town."

"I don't want a living, I want a life — "

"Don't say it!"

"A lifestyle, Cullin! A lifestyle. Is that too much to ask?"

It was. Cullin hated the word lifestyle. It was an automatic red flag as far as he was concerned, a triumph of style over substance. Producers and directors trivialized his scripts, and his wife trivialized his life. But it wasn't, he had to admit, without provocation.

The current slump was awful. A writers' strike loomed on the horizon, and the studios and networks were stockpiling scripts; not that they had stockpiled any of his. He was in a financial cul-de-sac, and to make it worse, Terry had been getting work — on *Desperate Housewives* of all things. Art imitating life, Cullin thought, grinding his teeth.

At times like this he turned to prayer and craigslist.

EDITOR/WRITER FOR NASCAR JOURNAL

He hated Nascar.

GHOSTWRITER WANTED

He knew who for. A friend of his had written _____'s last book. _____ had never paid him more than a start payment. His friend had the pleasure of seeing the book he'd written become a bestseller, while he lost his house and moved into his mother's garage.

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FILM REVIEWER FOR NEW GAY/LESBIAN MAG

He briefly considered switching teams, but quickly gave up on the idea. Most of the gay scribes he knew were hipper than he was. With their gaydar, the editors would see through him in a minute. Of course, they might take him on as the token breeder....

Then he saw...

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

Hmmm. He opened the advert.

> Can you write to order, yet overcome the order? Are you a devilishly good master of the details? Can you make me feel that I've hired a superior wordsmith, a craftsman nonpareil to take my vision far beyond my poor ability to conceptualize? If so, convince me.

It didn't sound like the same old hackneyed pitch. But was he up for this? Then he heard his wife banging around angrily in the laundry room. What did he have to lose?

He wrote a snappy letter, attached a resume, and sent it back through the aether. Forty minutes later the computer played its posthorn to announce that he had mail. It was more than brief. "Ten A.M. tomorrow," with an address on Ventura Boulevard.

He did not tell his wife, but shut himself away in his office and worked on his latest screenplay until she had gone to bed.

"Where did you sleep last night?"

"On the couch in my office."

"Hmmmph."

While Terry went off to the beauty salon Cullin hurried to make his appointment, but when he reached Ventura Boulevard he found that the address was that of an optometrist. He panicked. Had he written down the wrong number? No, the email printout matched the number above the door. He was in the right place. Perhaps this was some sort of elaborate practical joke. Well, if it were, he didn't find it funny. With a sour growl

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he pushed into the optometrist's, where a prim blond woman in a white coat waited behind a glass-topped counter full of sunglasses. "Mr. McSherry?"

"Uh — yes."

"Out through the back, sir. It's across the alley."

"Thank you."

Across the alley was an eight-foot hedge inset with an arched wooden gate and door. The doorplate read BEALE. Deciding not to knock, he pulled open the door and stepped into the backyard of a large, square McMansion on Cantura Street. He'd seen a few of these being built, and he knew what the locals thought of them. But there'd been no way to stop this *nouveau riche* trend. In Los Angeles, money rolled over taste every time. Whoever this Beale was, he'd made a pretty good job of civilizing the house.

The paintwork was subtle; the building actually reminded Cullin of a vintage Georgian. Trees close in broke up the severity of line, while the hedge seemed to surround the entire property, entwined with decorative flowers. The lawn was perfect; a walk of interlocked flagstones wound toward the house, dividing to circle a cunning stone fountain, crowned with a horned Pan peeing water in an endless stream. The air was perfumed with fragrance. "Mr. McSherry, I would guess. You're prompt."

Cullin turned to see a slim, precise man appear from around the corner of a garage that he had not realized was there. The property was much larger than it looked. "I try to be on time," he said lamely, attempting to reestablish his equilibrium. You certainly have the advantage of me, he thought.

The man offered his hand; Cullin found his grip cool and firm. "You are Mr. Beale?"

"Yes." Beale removed his gardening apron, hanging it from a hook on the garage. "Please. Let's go inside. Coffee?"

"Thank you."

Beale left Cullin in a windowed parlor, returning a few moments later with a silver tray of coffee and those little cookies that the English called biscuits. In appearance and voice Beale reminded Cullin of an older, slightly grayer David Hyde Pierce. The writer decided almost immediately that he liked this man, even more so a minute later when Beale said,

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"So, Mr. McSherry, I've read your resume and many of your writings. The job is yours if you'll take it."

Not, if you want it. Cullin knew that many of his scripts were on file at the Writers Guild, much of his prose in various libraries, but it would have taken Beale some time to have found it. And... "Job? What sort of job, sir?"

"Call me Howard."

Cullin smiled. Howard Beale was the character Peter Finch had played in *Network*, the one who had screamed, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!" If it were a coincidence...well, in Hollywood you learned not to trust coincidences.

Howard Beale put down his coffee cup. "Cullin, I'm an entrepreneur of sorts. I buy and sell things, and, while I've had some influence on television through finance and content, I'm now ready to make a more direct impact."

"Ah." The producer-investor drawn to the other side of the camera; an old story in Tinseltown. "So, what sort of influence were you planning on? Dramatic? Commentary? Public television?"

"Infomercials actually."

Cullin's heart sank. The lowest form of writing; commerce without art, taste, or honesty. Pocket fishing rods, Ginsu knives, haircutting vacuums, oldies music collections, exercise machines, get-rich-quick schemes. Still, it would be no worse than writing for Fox Noise, which he'd done for six months before they'd canned him for his politics. Buck up, Cullin, old scout. If you're going to be a whore, be an egalitarian whore. He forced himself to smile and nod, but Beale was ahead of him.

"I know what you're thinking," Beale said in a kindly tone, "but I don't believe that this will bore you. Cullin, I daresay you'll find it downright fascinating. But let's talk money and time. I'll need you full days Mondays and Fridays, and Wednesday afternoons. Later, when we get rolling, there may be some functions to attend, but nothing egregious, I assure you. You'll be in charge of writing copy, coordinating with our Producer and our Customer Relations person, the young lady who'll be running our phone banks. Oh, and our Lawyer, of course. But you'll report to me."

"Exclusivity?"

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Beale blinked. "Oh? No, not at all. So long as you fulfill your obligations to me, I encourage you to write, publish, and produce your own work. The better for us all if we are each successful in our personal endeavors. The only work I'll make any claim on is the work you'll do here, in my service. And for this service, I propose to pay you two thousand a week."

Cullin fought to keep his jaw from dropping. He'd been expecting twenty dollars an hour. Two thousand a week for a part-time job? "Well," he said quickly, "that would be fine. Of course, I'd have to read the contract first."

"I would expect you to."

"Then I guess I'm your man."

Howard Beale broke into a brilliant smile, a winning, becoming smile. "Well done. First rate. Oh, I should ask; are you churched?"

"Churched?" asked Cullin, puzzled. "I'm afraid I...."

"Are you a member of a church? Do you attend regularly?"

"Uh, no." A flash of panic. "Should I be?"

"No, not at all. It was just idle curiosity. Welcome to our little family."

IT WAS THE WORST possible timing, it was the best possible timing. He opened the front door of his house to find his wife's matching luggage lined up in the hall. "Terry?"

She came bustling down the stairs, dressed in her best peach suit. "Oh, there you are. You'll never guess; I got a movie. We start shooting tomorrow, in Italy. I'll be gone six weeks. You'll be okay, won't you?"

"Well...."

"It's a real break, a caper film with Leo and Brad and Angelina. Please be happy for me."

"Sure, I..."

"I'll call from the hotel the moment I'm settled." There was a knock on the door. "Get that, will you darling?"

Cullin opened the door to reveal a young Keanu Reeves wannabe in a black suit and Matrix sunglasses. "Miss Olin?"

"Right here, dear," Terry chirped. "Get my bags, will you?" She

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turned to Cullin and made a little moue. "Darling, I shall miss you terribly."

Said the Walrus to the Oysters, Cullin thought sourly, but he tightened his smile and nodded. Then he hefted her remaining bag and helped Keanu load the trunk. Terry poised at the car door.

"I never asked. You had some sort of appointment this morning, didn't you?"

Like there's time now. "Just coffee."

Terry smiled knowingly. "I guess it beats working."

Cullin walked around the empty house, feeling light and relieved. Thank God I didn't tell her about the job. If she leaves me for some Laurel Canyon clotheshorse, well, one can live much more cheaply than two in this town.

He took himself out for an expensive dinner at Terusushi, watched Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, then went to bed. Tomorrow was Friday, and Cullin McSherry would be working.

This time he went to the front door of Beale's house and was admitted by a fortyish man in a T-shirt and khakis, a green ball cap back to front on his head. "I'm Gerry Gold, the producer."

"Cullin McSherry, the writer."

"Nice. We're in here."

Here was a pleasant dining-cum-conference room; coffee on the sideboard and the obligatory muffin basket. Seated at the table, fiddling with their iPhones, were two others.

Cullin assumed that the sharp-faced man in the $1,200 suit was the lawyer. The suit glanced at Cullin and gave him a noncommittal lawyer's smile. But the girl was something else.

She was a sprite, in a floppy gray pullover and black tights, her bare feet curled up on the chair in what Cullin assumed was a yoga position. Her small face was made smaller under Clark Kent glasses and tumbled masses of light brown hair, as her phthistic hands caressed the iPhone's touchscreen. She reminded him of an oldies song, "Sugar Shack." Your wife is away for six months, maybe for good, whispered a voice in his head. He shook it off. Beware of the opportune attention shift.

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Gold bent close to his ear. "That's Marvin Needleman, Beale's attorney. And the ninety-pound hippie chick is Erica Donat. She handles the phone banks. She's some sort of distant descendant of Robert Donat, the actor, and a whiz at human resources."

"Hmmm." Cullin sat down across from Erica, who wrinkled her nose at him. Like a rabbit, he thought. The lawyer, Needleman, passed him a card. Cullin fumbled for his, and got Gold's and Erica's as well.

"Ah, everyone's getting acquainted?"

Beale had come in, looking folksy in a cardigan straight out of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. "I see you've all met Mr. McSherry, our scribe. Good, then let's get started."

Beale talked — they listened, took notes, and agreed. That was the way of it, and while later their meetings might become cooperative affairs with more blue-skying, today it was marching orders. Cullin not only accepted that, he was comfortable with it. Howard Beale understood how things were done.

Gerry Gold was instructed to have every studio resource, B-roll footage library, and CGI source standing by.

Erica Donat was to hire six shifts of five phone answerers, and three backup shifts if expansion looked likely. And she was to vet them thoroughly. Beale wanted the best.

Marvin Needleman, as Beale's lawyer, was obviously much more in the know than the others. He reported that he had agreements signed with eight cable networks and Fox, and had retained the firm of Creelburg, Garvin, and Smoot if they ran into any problems.

And Cullin was instructed to start developing open-ended, non-specific pitches for very high-concept products. When Cullin attempted to find out more about those products, Beale only smiled and said, "Every man and woman's heart's desire."

Cullin left, knowing little more than he had when he'd gone in. As he was heading down the front walk to his car, Beale called from the porch. "Do you have lunch plans?"

"Not really, no."

"Join me."

Beale led him to a gleaming silver sports car parked in the shade of an old oak. "What kind of car is this?"

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"It's a Tesla," Beale said proudly, running an admiring hand over its curves.

"I've heard of these, but I didn't think any were out yet."

"They're not. This is a prototype. The man who designed it owed me a favor."

The car was a success monster. He remembered Will Smith's signature line from *Independence Day*: "I gotta get me one of these!"

Beale wheeled them onto the 101, the 405, the 5, the 210; driving effortlessly, as if the speed limit were only advisory, talking softly above the humming engine, making everything he did seem autonomic. The Tesla swept through traffic like a boom camera speeding through a model. "Where are we going?"

"There's a wonderful little Tex-Mex place at the foot of Kagle Canyon." Cullin knew it, The Stagecoach Stop. It dressed like a Colorado diner, but sat within shouting distance of L.A. and served the second-best biscuits and gravy in Southern California.

Over a late breakfast, Beale steered the conversation through a dozen subjects, none of them pertaining to the work Cullin would be doing. Finally, over coffee, the producer smiled at his writer. "You're dying to know what you'll be selling, aren't you?"

Cullin shrugged. "I am curious, but I figured that I'd wait you out. You had to tell me some time, otherwise what's the point?"

Beale laughed. "True, quite true. Very well, Cullin, do you believe in souls?"

"I'm not sure," Cullin replied carefully. While he was normally pragmatic in his honesty, something told him not to lie to this man. "I think it's a way of defining the essence of personality. Guilt is the body temperature, and the conscience is pain — if that makes any sense."

"Perfect sense," Beale replied. "You have a concept of right and wrong, and you try to do right."

"Whenever possible."

"Yes."

"But I never saw it as a specific organ, or a spirit, or a thing. That's for devout Catholics, Evangelicals, Orthodox Muslims and Jews, I suppose...."

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"None of which would work well on this project," Beale said. "I need pragmatists, humanists, agnostics...."

"Atheists?"

"Atheists, no. How can you get atheists to buy or sell souls, if they don't believe in their existence? Besides, they never shut up. They're continually trying to convert people. They're worse than Mormons."

Cullin sipped his coffee, digesting this. "Is that what we're going to be doing? Buying and selling souls?"

"Yes. Do you think you can do that? Promote a soul bank?"

"Is this why I haven't been asked to sign a contract yet?"

"Yes."

A soul bank. Intriguing. "I take it that you would buy more than you sell."

"Initially, yes."

"And the going rate?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"Really?" Cullin's mental wheels spun wildly. He could think of nothing that would make the hardcore religious right go crazy faster. For someone not connected to a church to consider even messing with the soul....

What was he thinking? This was difficult. Having never seen the soul as an entity, he had a problem visualizing its...use, at least for the buyer.

Beale put his fingertips together. "I think that within a year I shall be able to dispose of at least half a billion dollars."

"And the return?"

"I will legally own upward of two million souls."

If I were starving, Cullin considered, and I owned a thousand square miles of land on the Moon, I would still be starving. Beale's smile was mocking him. "I give up," Cullin McSherry sputtered. "How do you make money back? What's the catch?"

"Why none, in buying them. But, should your worldview change, and you decide that you want your soul back.... Well, how do you think I got that car?"

That night Cullin McSherry sat with a pristine notebook and a frosty bottle of Corona, listening to the Mozart Clarinet Concerto. What am I

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getting myself into? Nothing will convince a non-believer to take another look at religion faster than the fact that cold hard cash could be made off the intangibles. After all, isn't that what religion did — the largest, richest, least useful industry in history, making money off salvation, forgiveness, tithing, indulgences, crusades. Maybe this would serve to highlight....

Cullin snorted. He wasn't about to start fooling himself that he was on the side of the angels. It was a shuck, but he'd try, for his part, to make it an honest shuck.

The phone rang.

"Mr. McSherry? This is Erica Donat. From the meeting?" Her voice was soft, tentative and almost childlike.

"I remember. You wrinkled your nose at me." It was supposed to be funny, but the joke fell flat.

"Mr. McSherry, can I see you, right now?"

They met at the Fox and Hounds. Erica was still wearing her gray jersey and black tights, and Cullin was amused to see the barman card her. She brought a glass of wine to his booth.

"Hi," she said, sliding onto the seat opposite. "Thanks for meeting me."

"It's my pleasure," Cullin said honestly. Terry came to mind, probably sitting in her trailer on the shores of Lake Como, composing a "Dear John" letter. If I can read her so well, he thought, why do I stay with her? Inertia, he realized. Inertia and lawyers. He returned his attention to Erica. She was not wearing her glasses, but she furrowed her brow seriously. "You sounded urgent."

"It is. I had dinner with Howard tonight. He told me what we would be selling."

Cullin nodded. "He told me over lunch."

Erica sat bolt upright. "Are you okay with it?"

"How old are you, Erica?"

She bristled. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm just trying to establish a frame of reference: what you know, cultural context, how you approach all of this."

"Oh." She subsided, then put both hands on the table. "I'm thirty-three. I have degrees in psychology, philosophy, and history."

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"And you object to the buying and selling of souls?"

"No, I don't, and it bothers me that I don't." She shook out her mass of light brown hair. "Can we talk about this?"

They talked over drinks, and during a long walk through the neighborhood, then back at her place. Later, in bed, they didn't say that much.

On Monday morning, both of them signed their contracts.

Initially Cullin wanted Beale, who was almost supernaturally magnetic, to be his own spokesman. It had worked well for others, from Harland Sanders to Lee Iacocca, but Howard would have none of it. "I have far too much to do right now," he said, but sweetened the refusal by adding, "Perhaps later, if the need arises." So, Cullin — while he was crafting the pitch — went looking for smart actors. He found a bright, reasonable Texan by the name of Evan Tinker, whose drawl had been softened by twenty years in Hollywood. Tinker was an agnostic and thought that the irony involved in buying and selling souls was hilarious. Beale offered him a SAG contract with a generous back end, and Evan was aboard.

The day after Evan hired on, and four days after Terry had left for Italy, the "Dear John" letter arrived. It was a masterpiece of disinterested, legally neutral sympathy and, at the same time, a proper kick in the ass. She wanted out. Cullin decided to pass it on to Needleman, but first he showed it to Erica that night in bed. "How long did you stay with this woman?"

"Four years."

She laughed. "You're easy."

"Said the philosopher-psychologist..."

She elbowed him in the ribs. "That's philosopher-psychologist-historian."

"...who went to bed on the first date."

She kissed him. "Sometimes I get it right."

After they had let the kiss lead them naturally through twenty minutes of fun, they lay in each others' arms, perspiring happily, but a question came creeping to Cullin's mind. "Did Howard say anything about buying our souls?"

Erica wrinkled her forehead. "I asked about that. It's in the contract

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under Participation. No member of Beale LLC will be allowed to use the Soul Bank. He doesn't want our souls."

Cullin felt oddly offended. "Hmmm. I don't know whether that's good or bad."

Erica rolled over, supporting herself on her elbows, her small breasts resting on his arm. "Cullin, my family was Catholic. And, with a name like McSherry...."

"Black Irish," he said. "Pennsylvania coalfield Protestants."

"Ahh. Well, the Catholic Church buys, sells, owns, uplifts, and condemns souls every day. What you get in return is a false sense of security and, if you're lucky, not molested by a priest. As far as I'm concerned, the soul is whatever an individual makes of it. If Joe Six-pack wants to sell his, he was already someone else's problem."

"Mmmmph."

"So, tomorrow we launch. Are you ready?"

THE FIRST INFOMERCIAL broke all across the domains of late night cable at one A.M, L.A. time, and had the production values of a theatrical trailer. It opened on a sur-cam traveling shot through the pearly gates and into a heaven populated with people enjoying themselves like families in the park. Picnics, barbecues, volleyball, dog Frisbee, an old Merry-Go-Round, pony rides, a brass band, and children splashing in streams, playing tag, and riding little miniature trains. It was a Sunday afternoon that went on forever — no wings, no harps, no hymns, no robes. No God on his throne, just happy people; as if God had created this endless park, then gone on to other work.

Then the camera pushed through a dark opening into a vision of Hell straight out of Dante or Dore, Bosch, or Borges. Sinners writhed, armies marched, fires burned, torture, unending agony, plague, pestilence, death, worms, monsters, serpents, flies, severed limbs, screaming and crying: an unending tour of suffering. Rising through the scene were two great dark trunks, like chimneys. The camera pulled back and changed focus to reveal that the trunks were legs — not of the Devil but of a man seated on a chair above the scene.

Wearing black pants and a paint-stained chambray shirt, Evan Tinker

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pushed back a wisp of his hair and smiled pleasantly. "If this is how you think of Hell, or of Heaven for that matter, this might not be for you. But then, this isn't real."

Evan stood, then reached down into Hell — which was now revealed to be nothing more than an intricate, static diorama — and picked up a winged devil. "These are just models. I paint them. It's my hobby."

Following Evan, as he strolled through the Heaven diorama, the camera pushed in on the painted devil as Evan set it down in the heaven display among the picnickers, where it now seemed to be accepting a cup of coffee from a housewife in a gingham dress.

"These are the images of Heaven and Hell we know from antiquity, from art and literature. Do I see the afterlife this way? No, of course not. That's why I'm here to tell you about The Soul Bank."

Evan rolled on smoothly with his pitch, interspersing tidbits of cosmology and physics with a thoroughly respectful approach to the idea of storing and housing immortal souls — he almost made it sound like a funeral plan. While Howard Beale, Evan, Gerry Gold and Marvin Needleman watched from the den, Cullin, after the opening pitch, walked through to the phone bank that had been installed in Beale's commodious living room. And the phones were ringing. Cullin eased up behind Erica, who was observing critically.

"How's it going?"

"It's interesting. So far we've gotten a lot of curiosity, a bit of abuse, compliments on the pitch, and about forty sales."

"Really? Forty?"

"Uh-huh." Erica nodded seriously. "As soon as we get back their signed contracts, we'll start clearing their checks."

"Wow."

Cullin looked over the phone answerers. They'd all been trained in how to handle the obvious situations. Every call was recorded and everything questionable would be reviewed by Needleman's legal beagles. The phone answerers, all actors, were making $25 an hour with benefits, each doing three six-hour shifts a week. They were eager, enthusiastic, not to mention good looking.

"Any of those guys made a pass at you yet?" Cullin whispered.

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"Yes, and not just the guys." She bounced her hip against his. Just then, one of the phone people put up his hand. "What?"

"I've got someone on the phone who claims to be Cardinal Roger Mahoney. He wants to talk to Mr. Beale."

Cullin went back to the den and told Howard, who laughed. "My, my. Things do move fast when you get their attention."

Within thirty-six hours the Soul Bank was big news. They made Fox, CNN, MSNBC, even the *CBS Evening News with Katie Couric*. They were Number Two on Countdown with Keith Olbermann. By the time they received their first downloadable signed contract for a soul, they had received more than six thousand calls, and Erica had doubled the size of the phone bank. By the end of the first week all of the TV and radio preachers were railing against them, and half of the cable stations, under pressure, had pulled their ads, though they had been promptly picked up by the Cartoon Network and Spike. Everyone from Matt Lauer to Brian Williams was clamoring to interview Howard Beale, but Evan Tinker, who was serving as Howard's public persona, was steadfastly refusing all requests. After speaking twice with Howard, Cardinal Roger Mahoney announced that he considered the entire business of a soul bank to be an elaborate hoax, a Byzantine joke masquerading as a sociological experiment. Besides, the Cardinal stated with comforting certainty, you couldn't really sell your soul.

"Is the Cardinal right?" Erica asked over dinner one night at the Good Earth. "Is the soul nontransferable?"

Evan Tinker laughed. "I thought you were a Catholic."

"Not since I grew a brain," Erica snapped. "And I'm not talking about my soul. The customers — can you part a person from his soul?"

"If you believe the Bible, it used to be done all the time," said Evan's girlfriend, Sheila. She was a stunning blond actress, exactly the type that Evan favored; smart, sharp, the kind that would eventually find Evan's soft, kind center and cut it out with a spoon. But it was early days yet. She and Evan were still Hollywood happy. Cullin sighed and squeezed Erica's hand under the table. She rewarded him with her characteristically knitted brow.

"Yeah," Cullin said, again grateful that both he and Erica were

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ineligible for the Soul Bank. He put both elbows on the table. "The soul...."

"Yeah?" asked Sheila.

"First you have to determine whether it exists. Is there any way to do that?"

Evan deferred to Erica. "You're the historian. Is there historical evidence for the soul?"

"As a concept, as a literary and religious focus, it seems in most cultures to be a given. And if it is real, an actuality, a finite thing...."

"Well, anything real can be disposed of. But can it be destroyed?" Evan asked. "Cullin?"

"Okay. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that the soul is real, a part of every human being. And let us suppose that it lies in the Isles of Langerhans, or the Circle of Willis, or some other strange part of the body that you only hear about on *Grey's Anatomy* or *House.* And it's an organ that a complete human being needs to function in society. If you cut it out you get a sociopath or a serial killer or a retard. If you cut it out, the person becomes subfunctional. Now, on your driver's license you have a pink dot. That means that you're an organ donor...."

"I don't," said Sheila.

"Well, you should," Cullin continued smoothly. "Cut out a kidney, someone else has your kidney, and you're missing one. Or, after death; heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, corneas...."

"Wouldn't it be freaky if the soul was in your appendix?" Evan said. "Happily, I still have mine."

"Me too."

Only Sheila didn't. Erica gave Cullin a significant look as he steered the conversation back on message. "So, if we posit that the soul does exist in the body, and people are not having it surgically removed, how are we buying it?"

"If it's not a pure-and-simple scam," said Sheila, "it has to be a supernatural agency. Like, when you agree to sell it, and you sign the contract, and you cash the check, something happens."

"A volitional trigger."

"Have you talked to anyone who's sold his soul?" Sheila asked. "Did they feel any different?"

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"I have," Erica replied. "Several. They say they don't notice any difference, that nothing's changed, but I don't know how they were before."

Evan rubbed his chin. "Did you get a sense of anything common or similar?"

After a long moment, Erica said, "They were all a bit creepy. Or maybe I'm just losing my taste for the work."

On the way home they walked arm in arm along Ventura Boulevard in the twilight. Erica, who was not much of a talker, was even more silent than usual. "You okay?"

"Mmmm."

"Our contracts only hold us for the first six weeks," Cullin said. "With a renewal option, of course. Are you thinking about quitting?"

"Thinking about it. You?"

Honestly no, but as Cullin had never learned to be totally forthcoming with women, he said, "I've considered it. Two Gs a week with benefits and bonuses is hard to let go. Hey, we still have three weeks until the renewal. Let's see what happens."

WHAT HAPPENED was a series of subpoenas and a lawsuit for fraud against Howard Beale LLC, its chairmen, and officers. And, of course, the entire orientation of the trial turned out to be upside down and inside out, as if it had been scripted by a suicidal Lewis Carroll on strong drink. The suit was brought against Howard by a coalition of atheist and agnostic groups, secular Jews, and the California Chamber of Commerce. Announcing for the defense and backing up Beale was an alliance of Catholics, Evangelicals, and Mormons who deplored the very idea that Beale would buy souls, but maintained that such commerce was theoretically possible because the soul did exist. The word that everyone was focused on, of course, was fraud.

"Will we have to testify?" was the question that the phone answerers kept asking Erica.

"I don't know. It depends on how far each side wants to push the publicity," Erica tended to reply with increasing crossness. Cullin had noticed that these days she seemed to be riding the edge of a razor blade

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that was honing sharper as they approached the time to renew their contracts. Cullin was pretty certain that he would sign on again, as certain as he was that Erica wouldn't.

The press was calling the whole fiasco the Cable TV Scopes Monkey Trial. Both sides had lawyered up heavily, but among the staffers of Beale LLC the feeling was that Howard Beale was the Ace in the Hole. He was frighteningly articulate, cheerful, and confident. As Marvin Needleman admitted in a rare moment of candor, "They think that Howard's the Devil, but I think that Hell is just one of Howard's subsidiary companies. Alongside Howard, the Devil is about as convincing as Dr. Phil."

Cullin was relieved that Erica didn't hear that, and he thought about it a lot. There was a moment when hyperbole became visionary, revealing the world in a way that made you want to throw up.

The trial began on a Monday. On Tuesday all of the original staffers renewed their contracts for six months excepting Erica who, citing personal reasons, decided to bow out. She'd already trained up one of her phone girls — a flip, funny, adulterous housewife named Dale Denny — and Howard threw Erica a going-away party, which Erica could not refuse attending. Howard was kindness itself, and gave Erica a generous severance check, which he called a plank-owner bonus. Cullin looked up the term later and found that it referred to sailors who commission a ship, and are supposed to receive a deck plank if the ship is ever broken up.

But the *S.S. Beale* sailed smoothly through the opening phase of the trial. Various positions were staked out, expert and inexpert witnesses were announced, and lawyers thundered forth majestic statements worthy of both God and Hollywood. The press ate it up.

Cullin divided his time between the courtroom and the studio, where he, Gerry Gold, and Evan crafted up-to-the-minute topical commercials and fed them to the nets. The opening of the trial had been the catalyst that had spread The Soul Bank far and wide across the channels, becoming the hottest commercial property since the Geico Cavemen. In court, Cullin sat at the back and watched the show, particularly the beatifically smiling Howard Beale who stationed himself in the first row and conferred with Needleman and his army of Law Dogs.

At night Cullin returned to an empty house. Erica had decamped on

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the night of the going-away party, leaving not so much as a note. That made twice in two months that women had walked out on Cullin McSherry, and he decided to stay single, if not celibate. But he'd miss that goofy little hippie chick.

The oddsmakers were giving five to three on Beale winning the suit, when Erica suddenly showed up on *Larry King.*

She was wearing a loose red silk dress that Cullin had never seen before, but the masses of light brown hair and the Clark Kent glasses were unmistakable. She even wrinkled her nose once, then touched it self-consciously.

For his part, Larry King seemed content to sit back and let her hang herself with words, but Erica was a lot more put together than she looked, and a great deal more dangerous. When asked why she had agreed to work for Howard after she found out what he was buying and selling, she made no bones about it. "I didn't believe then that there was such a thing as a soul...."

"And now?"

"Now, I don't know. But many people do. I'd say even most of them."

"Including the ones who are selling theirs?"

"Yes."

"So, you think people should not be allowed to sell their souls?"

Erica laughed, and it was not a pretty laugh. "Of course they should. They do it every day. For things, power, what they call love. Our government sells *habeas corpus* for security, the churches make a mockery of devotion and charity.... No, Larry. I don't give a rat's nuts for souls. My objection is to Howard Beale."

This, apparently, was just what Larry wanted to hear. "But he seems to be a personable and open fellow. His finances are aboveboard. And no one twisted your arm to work for him."

No one but poverty, thought Cullin.

"No one but poverty," Erica snapped. "How much do you make a year?"

Larry raised his eyebrows, then smiled. "I'm sure that's of no relevance...."

But Erica cut him off. "At any given moment there are fifty thousand actors out of work in Hollywood, ten thousand writers, twenty-five

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thousand technicians. Suppose you haven't worked in five months and someone who knows and praises your work offers you two thousand dollars a week and benefits. What do you do? You read the contract, and then you sign."

"I see your point."

"And the boss is intelligent, kind, careful, compassionate, and as magnetic as Daniel Craig with a hard-on."

"Now, just a minute...."

"He just happens to be buying souls. You asked why I quit. Because Howard Beale is too good to be true, and if a thing is too good to be true, it probably isn't. I quit because I believe that Howard Beale is the Devil."

"Really?"

"Do you know what apsychia is, Larry?"

"No, I don't."

"Apsychia is the condition of being soulless. The simple sellouts and sins that we engage in every day destroy our honor, our karmic balance, our humanity, but I believe they only tarnish the soul. That makes it a job for the God-shouters and Holy Joes to worry about, and they make their money polishing the tarnish off those souls. But they can't save them. Only Howard Beale and God can do that. If you sell your soul to Howard it'll be his, and you'll spend the rest of life with no eternity to look forward to."

CNN decided to cut to a commercial break at that moment, and by some intervention of the gods of misrule, it was a spot for The Soul Bank. Cullin watched it go on, then three other more prosaic ones, but when the show came back Erica Donat was gone. Larry explained that she decided that she'd said her piece so she left.

Cullin took a deep breath and looked at the phone, half expecting it to ring. It didn't. Where was she with this? Finally Cullin dialed The Soul Bank.

"Welcome to The Soul Bank. I'm Brad, and we're so happy...."

"Brad, this is Cullin McSherry. Is Dale Denny there?"

"Uh...sure."

After a moment Dale's voice came on — in tones that were always smoky, and tight with coiled sexuality. "Cullin, babe, you really shouldn't call on this line."

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"I need information. Is Erica Donat a member of The Soul Bank?"

"Our Erica?"

"Yes."

Dale put him on hold for a minute, two, then came back on the line. "Cullin? She signed up last week."

"Thanks. Keep this call between us, Dale." What the hell was she doing? He decided not to tell Howard, to get hold of Erica on his own and straighten things out. He crawled off to bed, where he found he could not sleep.

But as the trial spiraled down to its inevitable conclusion, Cullin could find no trace of Erica, though he used every available resource short of directly asking Howard Beale for help. He did consider it. Like everyone else at Beale LLC, he ascribed a certain nebulous level of supernatural ability to Howard, an aspect of the job that some found discomforting. So it didn't surprise him when Howard pulled him aside one afternoon and said, "You know that Erica sold her soul to us?"

"I heard," Cullin said tightly. "Do you know why?"

"No. Perhaps it was an effort to identify with those whom she sees as our victims," Howard replied. "Legally she had every right. She was no longer an employee, so the computer didn't flag her name." He paused thoughtfully and put a hand on Cullin's arm. "If I had known I would have forbade the sale."

"I thought you knew everything."

"Me too," Beale said with a wry chuckle. "I guess I'm not the Devil after all."

Cullin shook off a chill feeling. "I wish I knew where she was."

"I think she's in town. One of Marvin's people said he saw her in Temple City."

Marvin's people. Lawyers or investigators?

A week later the trial ended. The jury ruled that there was a soul, thus abrogating the fraud charges against Howard Beale. The presiding magistrate, Judge Stegman, handed down an official opinion that the State of California, while recognizing the presumptive existence of said soul, made absolutely no judgments as to its nature or utility. The suit was voided, with costs to be borne by the plaintiffs.

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That night, while most of the crew were celebrating at Jerry's Deli, Cullin found the need for solitude and went for a long walk through the same neighborhoods that he and Erica used to frequent. He soon found himself under the interlocking elms on Cantura, before the house where it all had started.

The phone bank had moved into a vacant office three blocks away, and everything looked peaceful at the McMansion. The ground floor was dark, and only a soft light in an upstairs window hinted at occupancy. There were no pickets, no reporters, no lawyers rushing in and out. It was as if the entire sequence of recent events had never happened. Then he saw her, silhouetted in an upstairs window.

There was no way that he could mistake Erica for anyone else. When Beale appeared next to her Cullin's reaction was not jealousy, but a deep, undefined dread. Something had come full circle, like the blood orgy at the end of an Elizabethan revenge tragedy, and he knew he was part of it. He stepped through the gate and started toward the house, remembering a poem about fire and ice.

As his foot touched the bottom step of the porch, flames sprang up in every window of the Beale House.

He ran to the front door and strained against the lock. Visible behind the beveled glass window, fire was consuming the curtains. He pounded on the door and called their names until the unearthly heat drove him back.

He stumbled out to the street, trying to see if Erica and Howard were still in the window, but the entire house was glowing cherry red, as if the fire were feeding off it yet not consuming it. The elms, he thought, the other houses, as he pulled out his cell phone and made his futile 911 call.

CULLIN STOOD, TRANSFIXED, while two fire companies fought the blaze. They poured water and foam on it, but the building burned until it was nothing but ash — literally nothing: pipes, hinges, steel fittings, and supports, all had melted or boiled away. Granite foundation blocks had split and crumbled. There were no human remains either, and the police and fire officials told Cullin that he must have been mistaken when he thought he'd seen Howard Beale and Erica Donat in an upstairs

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window. Cullin knew better. He had witnessed a battle between good and evil. But who won?

The fire had seemed to focus inward. Not a tree was scorched, the fence vines had not withered, and the horned Pan had peed on through the conflagration. None of the puzzled firemen could get near the house until it had burned itself out, and as Cullin shivered in the night shadows he could hear them talking about the strangeness of the blaze.

When it was out Cullin walked home and slept. When he awakened twelve hours later to the ringing of the phone, he was still exhausted, as if he'd been force-marched until he'd dropped. The voice on the phone was Marvin Needleman.

"McSherry, I need to see you at the office."

"Office?"

"The phone bank. At three."

"What time is it now?"

"It's one."

Cullin almost asked A.M. or P.M. Instead, he took a scalding shower, drank two cups of coffee, and dressed in a respectable suit. When he reached the phone bank the lot was full of upscale cars.

Gerry Gold and Dale Denny were in the lounge. "I'm sorry to hear about Erica," Gerry began, but Cullin cut him off with such vehemence that the producer snapped shut like a frightened clam. After that, the three retreated into their own thoughts until Marvin Needleman stuck his head into the lounge and asked them to come to the conference room.

There, three men and a woman, all dressed in Armani armor, watched them expressionlessly. Marvin introduced each of them, though Cullin found later that, try as he might, he could not remember their names. Then Needleman announced that McSherry, Gold and Denny were being let go. No offense, no prejudice, big severance check, just clean out your desks and leave. Dale and Gerry tried to ask questions but got nowhere. Cullin knew better.

He went home, left a call with his agent to let him know that he was free, and started drinking. A week later he walked out of an alcoholic haze to check in and found that he had been unofficially, but effectively, blacklisted — a parting gift from the religious coalition that had backed Howard Beale in court. And that wasn't the end of it.

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Dale Denny's husband caught her in *flagrante delicto* with another man and shot them both. The other man was Gerry Gold.

Evan Tinker disappeared in Central America on a shoot.

Beale LLC, now carrying on as The Soul Bank Ltd., was doing better than ever.

And the former Terry Olin McSherry was signed to play the lead in a screenplay loosely based on their marriage. Cullin wasn't even given a script consultation, only an order to vacate "her house," unless, of course, he wished to contest. He didn't. It was time, he decided, to try the other coast.

So before the weather could turn cold he packed up his five-year-old Volvo with his possessions and hit the freeway. It was a soft evening in September, with plenty of afterglow in the west as Cullin headed out of town. Call me Ishmael, he thought, adrift on the sealed wooden coffin of my career.

As he approached the 405 interchange where he would turn north toward Interstate 80 and New York, a car pulled up alongside him on the right. Cullin recognized the silver Tesla, and he thought how appropriate a parting shot this was. The driver looked over and smiled, a beatific smile, frighteningly magnetic. And in the passenger seat, a girl — thin, phthistic, with masses of light brown hair — her attention focused forward.

Cullin's mouth was dry and his vision clouded. He could only nod at the man he had known as Howard Beale, the man who raised his hand, then turned his face forward. The Tesla accelerated into the night, a tiny point of dwindling red, leaving all others behind.

—For Harry Turtledove

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These lads accidentally launch a "rocket-balloon" spacecraft left unattended by the professor who built it. Soon they're "passing through a belt of X-rays," causing the ship and their own bodies to become transparent. Next they dodge a living, mile-long air monster that flies at 800 mph....

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Touring two island utopias, the trio learns that Earth should abandon automobiles, aircraft, and central heating in favor of a hygienic cavebound existence that could prolong life to 3,000 years. Then, in a sudden anticlimax, our lads go home.

In 1944 Low became the first-ever author named as a British sf convention's official guest. It must have been for his pop science....

—David Langford

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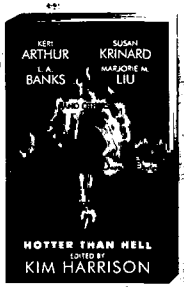

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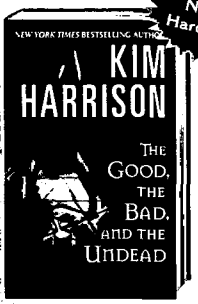

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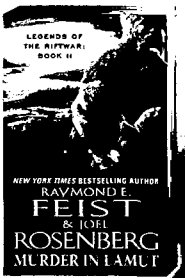

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